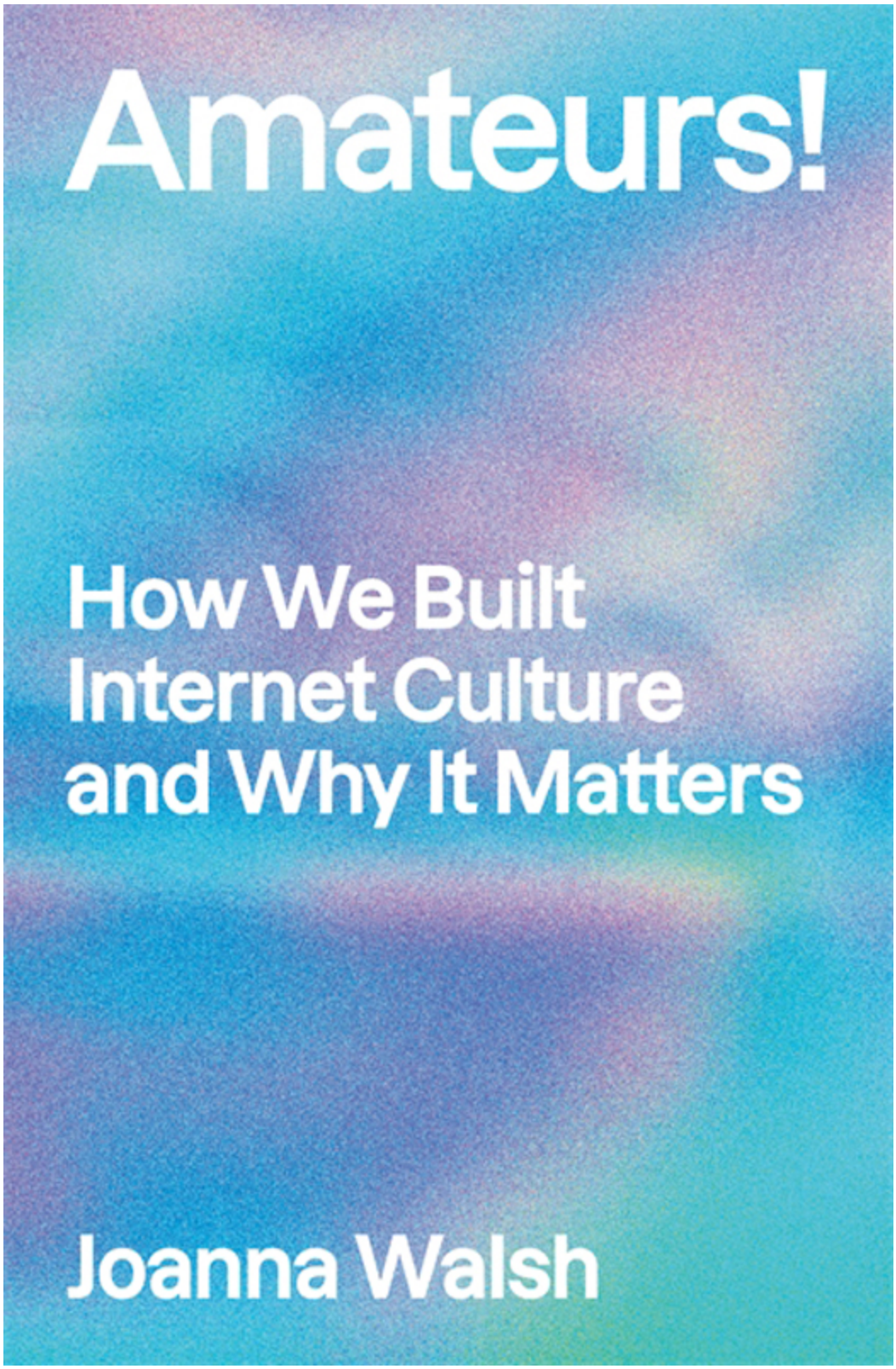
Amateurs!

How We Built Internet Culture and Why It Matters

Joanna Walsh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VERSO
London • New York

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First published by Verso 2025
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Author and publisher would like to thank those publications, detailed in the acknowledgements, in which earlier versions of some of the chapters appeared.

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1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Verso
UK: 6 Meard Street, London W1F 0EG
US: 207 East 32nd Street, New York, NY 10016
versobooks.com

Verso is the imprint of New Left Books

ISBN-13: 978-1-83976-539-1
ISBN-13: 978-1-83976-542-1 (US EBK)
ISBN-13: 978-1-83976-541-4 (UK EBK)

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Walsh, Joanna author
Title: Amateurs! : how we built internet culture and why it matters / Joanna Walsh.
Description: London ; New York : Verso, 2025. | Includes bibliographical references and index.
Identifiers: LCCN 2025021903 (print) | LCCN 2025021904 (ebook) | ISBN 9781839765391 paperback | ISBN 9781839765421 ebk
Subjects: LCSH: Art and the Internet | Amateurism | Arts and society – History – 21st century
Classification: LCC NX180.I7 W35 2025 (print) | LCC NX180.I7 (ebook) | DDC 776/.7 – dc23/eng/20250613
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2025021903
LC ebook record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2025021904

For everyone who ever made anything with me online

It's all aesthetics . . . do you even know what aesthetics is?

Elliot Stevens, lockdown 2020

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2004: Amateurs

I am an amateur.

Amateur means a lot of things. That I'm unpaid, or not paid at a professional rate; that I'm enthusiastic, that I want to do it anyway; that I spend time – habitual, spare time – doing it, time away from paid and unpaid work. Ungoverned by formal workplace standards, amateur also means I'm unqualified, unprofessional. That I fail.

The internet has made us all amateurs. Wikipedia knows for us. Hinge algorithms outsource who we love. Google decides what we see. Facial recognition technology knows if we've been bad or good. AI makes art for us, writes for us, codes for us and threatens to replace us at nearly everything. Anything made by humans is now artisan, has gone the way of craft, is obsolete, antique, cute.

This is nothing new. Once upon a time, people worked as switchboard and lift operators. There were more travel agents, bank tellers, cashiers, assembly-line and agricultural workers, data-entry clerks.

But: if the internet has amateurised professionalism, the internet has also professionalised amateurism.

The internet has made us all amateurs: YouTube educators; BookTok critics; Wikipedia editors; Reddit moderators; Flickr photographers; OnlyFans porn stars; Pinterest curators; Twitter meme-posters. We're game modders, instapoets, clicktivists, we make Facebook family albums, we create new worlds; some of us have had Second Lives. These amateur acts have one thing in common: they are creative.

The internet demands that we create an 'aesthetic', a way of appearing via any of its many interfaces. Creativity is the net's currency, and we use it

to buy our place there. Before the net, we appeared direct. Online, what we make, and make of ourselves, is experienced not only by whoever's in front of us, but by anyone we allow to see (and some we don't). Offline we may choose our ways of looking, moving, speaking, but online we record them, allow them to be added to timelines, watchlists, albums, replayable by people we've never met and never will – a.k.a. art.

I see things created online and I wonder if they're art and, if so, in what way? They look like the creative effort of an individual or group. They come at me across space and time via a medium, though it isn't a canvas, a stage or an old-skool screen. I don't go somewhere special to encounter them, like a gallery or a concert hall. I don't always give them my full attention. I look at them on the bus, or scrolling over lunch. I watch them in snatches. I read them when I'm bored. But they give me art feelings. Some of them mean more to me than work I have seen in galleries, watched at the movies, read in books. They *make u think*. They move me. I like them.

I don't know much about art; I don't even know what I like. But I like to like, and it's that rush of hitting *like* that gets me online. And, online, what's not to like? This liking isn't always a straightforward pleasure. It's a recognition of difference, an admiration of challenge, an appreciation of something smart, of a joke, of work done, even shock or disgust – all those things we talk about when we talk about art. Aesthetics, again. Because aesthetics is not only about creating, but experiencing and evaluating, noticing, identifying, sorting, picking and rejecting, making hierarchies, or making relations. In sorting, I am also creating something – a taxonomy, a list of what is there online. This is not only an act of judging; it is its own act of making.

Do we know we're doing art things online? The conditions of the internet have confused us. The net has fundamentally altered both what it is to be an artist, and what it is to consume art. The user-friendliness of online platforms means that creative acts are more casual, less effortful, not always needing the commitment or expertise required by what used to be called a hobby. Do we even know we're amateurs? Though some online creators are

– or consider themselves, or aspire to be – professional or paid, the proliferation of free content online causes confusion as to whether these side-hustles are actual work. It also blurs the lines of professional practice. Even for professionals, online engagement (a social media presence, a Substack, a TikTok) is often performed at an amateur level, untrained and unpaid, not part of the day job.

The internet is old now: we have aged together. Online isn't an unfamiliar experience any more; it's where we live. The utopian para-universe of the early net didn't pan out and most of us helped with that, helplessly. So many of us amateur creators secretly wanted the net to be a step to offline professional status: publication, exhibition, financial viability. Big business disguised as creative community, the platforms were, naturally, against us, and most of us didn't get there. Still, we got further than amateurs ever have before. And if amateurism has become strangely professionalised, then professional arts organisations – publishers, filmmakers, galleries – have started using vocabularies and styles learnt from amateurs online. What we did in these amateur spaces began to matter. Some of what we did became a thing, an aesthetic.

I don't like books that use 'we', that extend the particular to the general, erasing the subtleties of individual lives, but I'll use 'we' here. It is a radical *we*: of the solidarity of various experience; of what is excluded, undefinable, undescribed – an amateur we. We've been told we're 'only amateurs'; that we're 'users', as in 'not producers'; 'users', as in helpless addicts. We have more power than we have been told.

I'm here to look at what happened in the temporary autonomous zones where pros turn am, and ams go pro online – to look at what happens when a work of art doesn't have a critic, a publisher, a gallery or even a named creator. What happens when the only thing that sees it is the net? What happens when it doesn't call itself art at all?

2024: I'm meeting a group of people for a literary event in a bar in Paris: writers, editors, publishers, critics. Some are professional, others unpaid

enthusiasts. I guess you'd call them amateurs, except that isn't quite the right word. In the arts – in writing, especially – enthusiastic amateurs are the gene pool of successful professionals. Or perhaps *petri-dish* is a more appropriate metaphor. The event is a panel on the contemporary avant-garde, which is another metaphor. That phallic, military, linear figure of speech from the industrial era doesn't seem, to me at least, to cut it anymore – and specifically doesn't describe our situation. What, I ask, in what is more of a comment than a question, could be a more useful spatial metaphor?

The founder of the magazine, who has since retired, his writing too 'minor' (in the sense of Kafka's phrase, after which the magazine was named), to please the mainstream, answered: what the mag had done was to connect a series of peripheries. Whereas twentieth-century, urban avant-gardes were all *location, location, location*, our disparate group (if you could even call it that) was composed of the peripheral. We were marginal, contingent, amateur.

Yes, the thing about these people is we'd all met online. Though many of us were meeting in meatspace for the first time, the magazine celebrated was web-only. We came from different countries, different backgrounds. We were different races, cultures, ethnicities, genders, classes.

How did we get here?

Because internet.

In the early 2000s the new technological capacities of what came to be called Web 2.0 prompted a revolution of everyday life. Dynamic web pages allowed not only for visual content, but for interaction. These pages no longer required backend experts to run them but allowed amateurs not only to use but to build web aesthetics. If Web 1.0 was the domain of coders and hackers, for the first time, non-experts created and steered online culture.

Reflecting this confusing new mass individualism, 2006's *Time* magazine Person of the Year was 'Web 2.0: (You)'. 'You control the Information Age. Welcome to your world,' Time's Lev Grossman announced, ironically via

non-interactive print media. This utopia was characterised as amateur and, crucially, largely unmonetised. It was, Grossman wrote, ‘about the many wresting power from the few and helping one another for nothing and how that will not only change the world but also change the way the world changes’. Grossman pitted the net against *the man* – against wars, dictatorships and climate change – failing to see that it was already involved in all of these. But he noticed that this new form of leisure was also unpaid labour:

> We didn’t just watch, we also worked. Like crazy. We made Facebook profiles and Second Life avatars and reviewed books at Amazon and recorded podcasts. We blogged about our candidates losing and wrote songs about getting dumped. We camcordered bombing runs and built open-source software.[1]

Web 2.0 could, equally, be seen as a rebranding exercise for the net following the dot-com crash of 2001. Internet founder Tim Berners-Lee described the term, coined by Darcy DiNucci in 1999, as ‘a piece of jargon . . . If Web 2.0 for you is blogs and wikis, then that is people to people. But that was what the Web was supposed to be all along.’[2]

What made Web 2.0 different was not only the input of amateurs, but new opportunities for their exploitation. At the first Web 2.0 conference in 2004, media entrepreneurs John Battelle and Tim O’Reilly – whose company O’Reilly Media co-hosted the conference – told the audience that Web 2.0 heralded a ‘Web as Platform’ capacity, which meant ‘customers are building your business for you’.[3] User-generated content (UGC) may have flattened expertise, but it also opened up platforms for nerdy amateur experts. This process, which Berners-Lee called ‘radical trust’, allowed for fruitful co-creation, and co-curation between platforms/institutions/businesses and users. But it was re-conceptualised by Colin Douma, writing in *Strategy* magazine in 2006, as the perfect

marketing tool: consumers ‘will disconnect with a brand that silences them, and will align with brands that give them a voice’.

The platforms of Web 2.0 not only provided space for amateur creativity: they demanded it. People who had never taken more than a family snapshot, or written a job application, were suddenly allowed – and then required – to pen snappy aphorisms (Twitter); art direct, photograph and star in their own fashion shoots (Instagram, to selfies, to TikTok and more); write personal columns (blogs to Substack) – all in return for the chance to be in touch.

As platforms expanded, we got good at all these things. Popularity, kudos, expansive professional and personal networks were awarded to the wittiest tweeters, the prettiest influencers. For the first time, and at scale, platforms brought the word *social* together with *media*.

Making art became fundamentally tied to forming communities, a radical concept only dreamt of by twentieth-century avant-gardes. ‘Let everyday life become a work of art!’ called French thinker, Henri Lefebvre, in 1968, making art his solution to the alienation of capitalism. ‘Let every technical means be employed for the transformation of everyday life!’[4] Thirty or so years later, art finally became a tech-enabled practice that everybody did every day, as well as something intimately involved with everyday life – with maintaining family connections, establishing friendships, finding love and sex, and, also, with the expression and organisation of politics of all flavours.

Spoiler: universal creativity solved neither alienation nor capitalism. If twentieth-century thinkers expected this expansion of the arts into the everyday, and the everyday into the arts, to come from the left, online, much of it came from commerce. This was capitalism of a particular kind. Its technology had its roots in the military-academic complex of the proto-web, ARPANET, and from early Silicon Valley countercultures in which the pursuit of liberty had sometimes shaded into libertarianism.

The net also tied the political to the personal in ways that inverted that other countercultural 1960s slogan, ‘the personal is political’. Early social media – chatrooms and messenger services – morphed into spaces of self-

performance, which became increasingly predicated on the implied presence of a verifiable individual or entity. A profile suggests the limiting concept of the single autonomous personal creator. Along with creative accountability, the demand that these profiles be traceable to actual humans has, for better or worse, become a given – as has the collection and sale of personal data. What started as fun became a currency we bought into, in order to stay connected. Then it became a tax. Then, as platforms began to charge users, downgrading free-tier access, a paid service.

Whatever we're making online, this is not a hobby. This is business. And if we're not being paid for this work, someone is.

Whatever we are, we are not amateurs any more.

What was the amateur?

Amateurism has always been aesthetic because it is a matter of imitation. If Plato wrote that artists make – in the widest sense of the word – representations, then amateurs go one further, cosplaying professional creators. And we're mimetic to an extra degree because our imitation is less often taken direct from life but from fictional depictions. Without training, contacts or context, where else can amateurs look for how to be professional but to movies, books, comics, TV, urban myths, to representations of artists in art itself? And to depictions – in art – of amateurs.

There were two kinds of amateurs in most of the popular movies, radio, TV and books, those radically levelling distributable media of the pre-internet age. One was the gentleman amateur: the mad scientist, the eccentric collector, the wizard, or that scion of urban modernism, the private detective. Then there was the working-class enthusiast: the model railway hobbyist, the trainspotter, the steampunk garden-shed tinkerer, the autodidact, the outsider artist. The cliché went that the nuts-n-bolts proletarian amateur worked with material, while his upper-class counterpart operated via ideas, intuition and will. The gentleman amateur created

theories; the garden-shed inventor, objects. If the working-class amateur was Isaiah Berlin's detail-oriented hedgehog, the gentleman amateur was his overview fox. But they were similar in that they both conjured the effects of professional knowledge without the need for their audience or creators to fully understand the processes involved.

He (and across centuries that restricted women as professionals, he was almost always 'he') was a natural, with no need for formal training or qualifications. His amateurism lined up with tensions between the individual and the state in nineteenth- and twentieth-century megacities, typically played out via fantasies of class: upper-class amateur Sherlock Holmes vs lower-middle-class professional Inspector Lestrade; millionaire amateur Batman vs working professional Commissioner James Gordon. The locus of 'good' outside of the system was clear: the real enemies of these gentlemen amateurs were not their nemeses, but the state.

These amateurs may have been anti-authoritarian but their individualism always conjured its opposite, which – besides government, academy, police – was the crowd. The amateur rescues the city (the crowd) and preserves the state by evading its laws, but he does not critique or change it. The system must continue to exist in order that the amateur continues to exist outside it. This fantasy assertion of individuality produces a kind of cognitive dissonance for the consumer of these fictions who, as a fan, is necessarily part of a crowd. Emotionally opposed to the crowd – withdrawn, cool, impersonal – the gentleman amateur may be intense but in a way that is removed from the enthusiasm of his fans, whose affect is hot, too much, even ridiculous. These fictional depictions of amateurs answered a demand in their audience less to know about their pursuits, from time travel to murder investigations – and particularly technology – than to know how to *feel* about them.

If amateurs can be defined (as in French) as those who 'love' what they do, so can their fans. There are 'hot' fans of 'cool' characters, and these characters' continuing existence depends on their fans' unusual degree of enthusiasm. Just as there is no art without a viewer, reader, listener, critic,

there’s no aesthetics without fandom. Crowd feeling produces something in excess of individual experience, and it gains power when we do it in crowds. This hot excess makes fandom a creative act in itself, and it’s this excess that has become currency online, where it is economically and culturally central, for amateurs and professionals alike.

Like poetry, fandom relies, as the English Romantic poet William Wordsworth wrote, on a ‘spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings’.[5] But Immanuel Kant, still considered the foundational voice of contemporary aesthetics, wrote that the feeling of pleasure is not characteristic of a proper aesthetic experience. This distinction institutes a category of excess. Kant draws a line that is so tempting to cross: a sort of ha-ha, the trench-barrier so beloved of his aristocratic contemporaries, built by landscapers hired to design gardens that wouldn’t spoil a landowners’ aesthetic experience of nature by drawing too visible a barrier between the artificial and the natural. Where is the border? Who draws this line, digs this trench? What if you don’t belong to the manufactured landscape: if you’re not the landowner but the peasant, on the outside, looking in?

As Kant and Wordsworth were writing, rural peasantry became industrial proletariat and, as the digital age superseded the industrial, we transformed into (to paraphrase Hito Steyerl) proletarians of the screen: side-hustlers with nothing to trade with but our amateur aesthetic labour. Not ‘wretched’, as Steyerl termed it, but hopelessly hopeful. As ‘cruelly optimistic’ (as Lauren Berlant would have it) as any contemporary precariat, we were already prepared for life online. Most proletarian amateurs, even those born pre-internet, have always lived in a virtual environment, the culture pushed at us drawn from experiences we never directly inhabited.

Anything aesthetic is always unnatural, relying, as Kant wrote, on the gap between depiction and original. And the artifice of the screen is natural for those of us who are not of the nature of what it portrays. What I’ve loved has so often been without what Walter Benjamin called the ‘aura’ of the original work. I’ve only experienced Midnight Mass onscreen. Same for Van Gogh’s *Sunflowers* and Beethoven’s Fifth. Even pre-internet we

negotiated reality via its reproductions. The one-way street of old media meant I grew up in a cartoon world of rubber stereotypes, retaining some suspicion that capitalists wore top hats, and French men strings of onions. Not that we met anyone who fitted these categories IRL. If they ever existed, they were not even our own fantasies, but those of previous generations. Despite (or because of) their impenetrability, these images encircled our identities until we filled the spaces they left. We did not realise that, in filling them, the boundaries of those spaces became more rigid. Performing our selves via an aesthetic of secondariness, we were in excess of what could be said to 'naturally' exist. We could mock these images or aspire to them, but it was trickier to try to change them. Besides, as proletarians of the screen, what else had we got?

If the vehicle of engagement with industrial-era popular narrative art – from novels to cinema – has so often been an invitation to identify, this has been a deeply aesthetic request. Some stereotypes are aspirational, and aspiration is both mimetic and aesthetic. Across the twentieth century, our heroes have been aestheticised versions of *echt* human subjects. Before social media's invitation to connect, or at least peer through a window into the domestic lives of the famous, however staged, we saw their public shells in long shot: on billboards or the big screen, in the papers or the TV news, subject to professional production values. As such, our identification was always an investigation, an act of sleuthing as thrilling as any amateur detective story. We played, not at being these fully human individuals, but at being depictions of them. Identification can be a leap of generosity, but this was so often an aspirational leap of gender, race or class, the effort of which merely pointed to the gap between us and them.

White narratives continue to be offered to people of colour, male narratives to women, straight to queer, rich men's narratives to all other men. This kind of identification is not an experience of subjecthood, but then, we were never proficient at being human. However, taken as what, in film, is called a McGuffin (an only seemingly central plot device that keeps engagement with the work going), identification is a vehicle that allows

aesthetic work to take place, and this aesthetic work creates space for the re-politicisation of art.

Both the classes of fictional amateur I've outlined have been characterised as apolitical because their amateurism asks for no reward. This claim is itself political. The 'cool' gentleman amateur was not only emotionally withdrawn but seldom desired no remuneration for his services. His working-class counterpart also rarely used his skills to demand wages, status or a permanent job. The cliché of working-class amateurism was that it bypassed the rise and decline of state education as a guarantor of social mobility, and therefore did not demand education as a right. Is it any surprise that the figure of the amateur resurfaces on the late-capitalist aesthetic internet, in an era of the aggressive defunding of state education, particularly in the arts and humanities?

The proletarians of the screen – the influencer/tweeter/TikToker – make aesthetic content for their platforms via a means of production they do not own, and the platform owners recoup the economic surplus-value, but the whole process runs on another, less recuperable surplus: the consumers' and the makers' surplus-enjoyment, which hides the labour in this process. Online, what looks like leisure is now work.

The biggest players in the attention economy are in the business of guilty pleasures only seemingly stolen from work time. Platforms need consumers who crave not goods but good vibes – or bad vibes, as surplus-enjoyment is not always fun but is closely related to what psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan called *jouissance* – what goes beyond Freud's pleasure principle. Lacan's term for surplus-enjoyment was *jouissance* (enjoyment, pleasure, fun), and his *plus-de-jouir* means both *more-fun* and simultaneously *no-more-fun*. The gamified production-loop of surplus-enjoyment online relies on its necessary unsatisfiability, and this cycle is the actual enjoyable experience.

The fulcrum of the online aesthetic transaction that creates both surplus-value and surplus-enjoyment is not material but experiential. Of course, much pre-internet surplus-value has been created via the production of aesthetic experiences rather than aesthetic objects, but experience has never

before been the predominant mechanism for producers as well as consumers. An industrial-era worker was not expected to have an aesthetic experience making a product that provided an aesthetic experience for the consumer – say, a mass-produced vase or rug. But so many of the creators of online aesthetic experience work not for cash, but for, as well as via, aesthetic means – for the surplus-enjoyment of producing and experiencing ourselves via aesthetic media. Sometimes this surplus is the only payment creators receive.

What is the value of aesthetic work online? Though they invest, the simultaneous producer/consumer of surplus-enjoyment doesn't control the means of production. The internet capitalist makes a profit, which some of the producers hope, sometimes not without reason, to share, but a material reward is in no way guaranteed. The performance of surplus-enjoyment (liking, upvoting, smiling for the selfie) is necessary to gain surplus-enjoyment as a reward, the dopamine hit of liking and being liked that keeps us scrolling. Which kind of explains why everyone hates the internet but keeps on coming back for more.

But, if surplus-value can be recouped, surplus-enjoyment remains an excess from which nothing can be accumulated, making the harvesting of certain aspects of surplus-enjoyment impossible. Surplus-enjoyment, as Lacan writes, 'serves no purpose'.[6] It results in nothing except the looping production of itself. What does – what can – this do? Well, very much nothing, in a material sense. But this production of nothing is important, creating a space in which transactions can exist beyond recuperative processes. Even commodified leisure has some radical potential.

The experience of surplus-enjoyment is a complicated marker of the privilege of leisure. It's an aspect of aesthetics that can't always be bought, which is why so much money is poured into chasing it. This is the same aspiration that was at the heart of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's classic 1979 examination of meatspace aesthetic consumption, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*.

Taste's commodification of aesthetics into buyable objects and experiences has, ironically, historically proved a route for social mobility – but a straitened one. Bourdieu thought the exercise of aesthetic judgement, a.k.a. taste, was a point at which social change could take place, allowing people to move between classes (at the expense of leaving those class positions unchanged). Social mobility, in Bourdieu's world, came about via IRL material acquisition. In *Distinction*, he even published a list of where France's (OK, Paris's) *haute bourgeoisie* bought their plates, soft furnishings and even embalming services. What's less purchasable is the right gesture, voice, gait. All these aesthetic qualities are more easily mobilised online where appearance is key, and performances can be staged and temporary. Each performance makes available encoded social information, until every amateur can learn how to pass.

Traditional aesthetic professions that, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, allowed some social mobility especially for women – acting, modelling – were amateurish in the assumption that they did not necessarily rely on professional training but on the apparently natural miracle of 'appearance'. The Cinderella story of models or singers spotted in the street or singing karaoke in the pub has not only become iconic but bound up with feminised myths of 'natural', 'intuitive' and 'modest' talent and beauty. With professionalisation, and increasingly institutionalised access via the traditionally upper- and middle-class route of the university, these professions have become the privilege of the privileged, those who can incur the costs: fees, rent, travel to the place where the art is, the ability not to take a day job. Though wealth and connections have a similar advantages online, there are hacks available in the internet's uninstitutionalised world of pure appearance. Some influencers snap themselves in the changing rooms of designer boutiques or having coffee at a Michelin-starred restaurant: empty performances of implied consumption, in which the nature of the performance is more class-stratified than its performers. This taps into the traditional extra reward of aesthetic professions – not only money but that less tangible and more amateurish good: fame.

On the internet, everyone is required not only to be famous for fifteen minutes but to renew that fame endlessly in competition with all the other famous people in the world, which, online, is everyone. There's no structure to this competition, and no ultimate prize on offer, though there are plenty to be had. Hobbies have become side-hustles, or forms of aesthetic activism, or social capital-earning demonstrations that we're living the good life on Instagram or TikTok. Private and work time, like the private and public self, have leaked into each other. Amateurism isn't what it used to be and hasn't been for some time. And nowadays, who has time for leisure?

'The man of our times carries out in his own way, spontaneously, the critique of his everyday life. And this critique of the everyday plays an integral part in the everyday: it is achieved in and by leisure activities,' wrote Henri Lefebvre in 1958.[7] If the industrial revolution created leisure as a practice necessarily occurring outside office hours, its radical potential was limited because it existed only in the context of work.

Lefebvre makes a further divide: 'leisure machines' (technologies) are sorted into 'passive' and 'active' practices. He contrasts the 'passive' consumer of screen media with the 'active' amateur photographer or filmmaker. This (in)activity is deeply involved with class, gender, cultural and economic power, and evokes Pierre Bourdieu's educated aesthete, who was involved in an active observation of his object, and his working-class consumer who expected his object to engage or entertain him. For both writers, valuable aesthetic experience is distanced from the everyday.

While romanticising the 'authenticity' of scenarios that have historically been classed male – sport, mechanical tinkering – Lefebvre doesn't account for less formally organised or predominantly social aesthetic pursuits (going dancing, shopping), or those that overlap with utility (cooking, knitting). These are not just hobbies that the twentieth century tagged female, but they're the very side-hustles whose presentation creates value online.

Lefebvre's twentieth-century male worker was able to separate work and leisure via an awareness of his alienation: at the factory or the office, he

‘knows he is not working for himself’.[8] But the internet blurs the line between job and side-hustle and – simultaneously – the experience of producing and consuming aesthetics. That this has accompanied the personalisation of jobs (sometimes also labelled *feminisation*), work’s bleed into leisure time and the rise of the gig economy, is no accident.

Working at what we enjoy has historically been the privilege of small sectors of the most privileged classes. Messing with the leisure/work paradigm alters what we’re doing when we’re creating, and also when we’re not, as well as our pleasure centres in both activities. Working at what we enjoy has historically been the privilege of small sectors of the most privileged classes. This is nothing new: it’s long been a problem for women in a culture that equates so-called self-care with the maintenance of social value: are Pilates, haircuts and clothes shopping leisure or labour? Should we be rewarded for ‘being ourselves’?

Online the personal has never been so political – or economic. Or aesthetic. Far from breaking the division between public and private that Lefebvre claimed faciltates capitalism, amateur online self-expression often requires that we conform to a hegemonic idea of the individual. Under these circumstances, why not appropriate a set way of being a self – the talk show host, the agony aunt, the cookery demonstrator on YouTube or TikTok? Is this amateur adoption of professional modes the recuperation of self entirely into capital, or does it shift the purposes of capitalised aesthetics? Appearing in public – not as an expression of, but an aesthetic performance of, self – can act as a critique of compulsory individuality, and also a critique of work. Providing, as the French philosopher Jacques Rancière writes, ‘a public stage for the “private” principle of work’, a performer proves that ‘he’ (*sic*) is neither his job nor himself but ‘a man of duplication, a worker who does two things at once’. This ‘artistic practice is not the outside of work, but its displaced form of visibility’.[9]

Performance, Rancière writes, is a place where you lose your identity, and where you remake it. Public performance has potential for this individual remaking to become political via audience engagement. In a

2021 interview, the philosopher complained about the lack of this capacity in contemporary public spaces of theatre and cinema: ‘Not much goes on there that has to do with people being together in the same space. Most of the time people look at the work in silence, like it or are bored by it.’[10] Any potential for critique resides neither in the performance nor its viewer, but in mutual public engagement via the performance, something that is very possible online.

‘Does “amateur” still work as a descriptor for user-generated content on the internet?’ Or should we ‘investigate the category in order to abandon it’?[11] These questions were asked by the critic and curator Ed Halter in Rhizome, the online digital arts magazine, as early as 2009. ‘Perhaps we need a new category of “sub-amateur” or “ultra-amateur”,’ he suggested, ‘to describe what’s happening.’ What was happening? Halter had noticed an aesthetic doubling: professional artists had begun to work with aesthetics developed by amateurs online; amateur practice began to be recognised in professional spaces. This didn’t mean parity. Though some amateurs were paid, as some professional artists were not, they were and – and are – still seen differently.

Proposing the ‘sub-amateur’, Halter predicted ‘the end of the amateur, and the emergence of a new category that has always lurked within it: one that completely ignores the formal properties of images in favor of their raw instrumentality’. 2009 was a long time ago in internet years but this old content/form bugbear raised its head to redivide amateur from professional, aesthetics from politics.

‘The sub-amateur prefers a belief in content, and a disbelief in form . . . The artist appropriating sub-amateur practice often chooses to reveal this forgotten form.’ Halter continues to cast the artist as professional, creating, as Duchamp said of his readymades, ‘everyday objects raised to the dignity of a work of art by the artist’s act of choice’.[12] There’s something particularly extractive about continuing this pro/am division. The professional artist is still *doing* something with amateur ‘content’ – something that this content is presumed not to do already. This process

might be taken for granted when it's realised via the most traditional kinds of reproduction – as in, say, Van Gogh's much-discussed shoe paintings – where the original object is separated from the artistic rendition both by a difference in the material used and by the social position of the artist. It becomes troubling when photography steals the soul of the real, and challenging when a 'readymade' uses human creations – anonymous mass-market design – direct (soup cans, Brillo boxes, R. Mutt's urinal). But it is even more disturbing when the artist appropriates the aesthetic act of a – sometimes amorphous or difficult-to-identify – amateur individual or group.

There is a nervousness around the professional artist's position here. As Halter wrote: 'While amateurishness and slickness can be recouped as conceptual maneuvers, a distancing and thus partial disavowal of one's own production, this gesture itself might be denounced as "too studied".' Amateurs themselves often make this move, pointing up their own amateurishness in aping professional slickness on Youtube or TikTok. Was this a failure to understand that the amateur, untrained and unpaid, is often doing what artists do: making a sophisticated work that is also a critique: engaged, contextualised? And if this is the case, should these amateurs now be called artists, or are they something else?

Nedroid's viral 2013 cartoon 'The Internet' demonstrates the appropriative nature of online creativity.

The experience offered by much online creation does not fit into traditional aesthetic categories. It is rarely 'sublime' or 'beautiful'. Its seeming ineptitude is often part of the point. It does not offer a 'shock of the new', but operates via the minor pleasures of modulation, of parody and satire, exchange and community building. This is what the art critic Nicholas Bourriaud described in 1998 as *Relational Aesthetics*, whose purpose is not always primarily aesthetic, but 'learning to inhabit the world in a better way'.[13] Midrange but persistent, internet practice is the opposite of what used to be called 'avant-garde'.

But the situation Bourriaud describes in his book is still that of the pre-internet professional artist. The myth of the artist in this world was that some play a game of commercial success, and others the more risky avant-garde game of long-term influence. In this scenario, risk is individual, non-risk is communal; risk is original, non-risk is citational; risk exists in linear,

historic time, non-risk exists in the rhythms of repetition; risk is competitive, non-risk collaborative. Risk is associated with capitalism. It is the basis of speculation, which has been an engine of colonialism and extraction. What could be the opposite of that?

A not-entirely risky risk cycle has become inbuilt to establishment creative structures: so-called avant-garde writers publish; avant-garde artists show; and most avant-garde publishers and galleries market and distribute, seek establishment funding, reviews and awards. The notion of the avant-garde relies, as much as capitalism, on the production of something ‘new’, and the sameness of this process of the production of novelty is what Vinzenz Hediger called the ‘generative principle of modern art’, which can only exist in the context of the creation and acknowledgement of a canon.[14] Given that risk has long been a not entirely risky strategy in art, what risk is being taken in a refusal of risk?

It is not so risky for certain avant-gardes to exist when, in art-world contexts, they are supported culturally and/or financially. Actual risky risk has been transferred from the trad aesthetic categories of form and content to that of the circumstances of a work’s production. It can be risky for those outside established circles to occupy aesthetic space, or to occupy space aesthetically with their contingent creations, just as it is risky to occupy establishment space, even using established norms, when something about you doesn’t fit the picture – see the ‘walking while black’ meme that uncovers the policed experience of black Americans doing everyday activities in public spaces. If the situation of production is now the newest location of aesthetic risk, then what counts as aesthetic has to shift too, from the restless loop of modernism’s ‘make it new’ to different kinds of shocks, including the un-shock of the soft borders of contemporary creativity: its weak aesthetics and unprofessional practitioners.

Risk suggests transgression. Some of the riskiest strategies in recent avant-garde art have been those of non-differentiation – what Rancière called ‘blurring’: taking the risk of looking like non-art, whether operating via disparaged aesthetics associated with commercial art/kitsch or the

blurring of art with life via social practice, duration, mundanity and boredom, with no aspiration to transcend these factors. This second blurring is temporal. That radically durational, 'boring' works have recently gained mainstream recognition (for example, Chantal Ackerman's 1975 film *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles*, voted best film of all time by *Sight and Sound* in 2022) could hardly have happened without this blurring of the boundaries between professional and amateur aesthetics in the endless scroll-spaces of the net.

Online aesthetic presentations often have a looped feeling that relies not only on the net's capacity for ordinary users to present durational material, but the borrowed and failed professionalism of amateurs who 'make it new' precisely via the old. If traditional notions of avant-garde risk have relied on the idea of being *ahead of their time*, internet aesthetics are not only nostalgic for something referred to offscreen, but for previous onscreen representations that, some time ago, became part of our *real lives*, which were always already virtual. 'The virtual is not opposed to the real,' wrote Gilles Deleuze in *Difference and Repetition*, 'it possesses a full reality by itself.'[15] He didn't mean the net, but he may as well have.

If aesthetic artifice can no longer be isolated from what still gets called *everyday life*, it's not only because professional art has turned to mundane strategies, but because of the ways amateur practice has recreated the professional, with often deliberate shakiness. I'm interested in the radical nature of amateur aesthetic practice: of artifice that imitates artifice, that produces apparently non-transgressive work that does not feel traditionally risky – art in which the professional critic sees nothing further at stake. Categorised as low-class art, it rehearses non-risky emotions, or rehearses them in highly codified forms that seem, on the surface, to neutralise any risk involved.

Amateur work can sometimes resemble kitsch, that most industrial art form, which, ironically, provokes the most sophisticated aesthetic response. 'Awwww!' is a performative reaction that acknowledges its own artificiality. Hallmark Cards and genre novels are akin to ritual art. They

partake in the same kind of complicated, social dis/belief that Slavoj Žižek labelled *primitive*: belief as doublethink social performance. It's seldom that the consumer of kitsch doesn't know that what they're viewing is a representation, and that it is very far from the challenges of (even if they have never seen it) professional art. What it does is facilitate communication, communal experience. Jean Baudrillard, standing in Disneyland's car park in 1981, should not have been surprised that customers took it for an experience of the *real*, but that they already understood that, in order to have a real experience there, they must willingly surrender to the fake.

If amateurism bypasses risk, it may also produce a lack of failure: 'One can fail to be a professional,' Halter wrote, 'but one cannot fail to be an amateur.'[16] What are we to do with this lack of tension? Or rather, what does this lack of tension do to both professional and amateur aesthetics?

A reminder of how ineptly some art professionals have responded to this situation: in 2010, UK BBC arts critic Will Gompertz wrote that he 'can't find any net-based art of note'.[17] He was looking in the wrong places, and for the wrong thing; still searching for 'that moment of epiphany, where [viewers] feel they have seen a great work of art created using the medium'. Or perhaps he was refusing to look, his refusal a provocation – perhaps a protest from an art establishment that already felt itself being undermined.

In the comments beneath the article, 'Phil' points out that online aesthetics are excluded from art because of their medium: 'Looking through discussion of [the video game] EDTSD it seems that you can divide the comments into "people who think it's a form of art" and "people who want a walkthrough so they can complete it".'[18] This makes net art both purposive and pleasurable in ways Kant wrote that art is not.

Net art also differs in its production. 'It is naturally not a pure or singular practice, because of its networked nature of connecting to others beyond monocultural or modernist situations,' commented artist Marc Garrett, the co-director of London's innovative and web-friendly Furtherfield Gallery.

‘As a form of art, it is thriving, but not as we know it, Jim!’ The curator and art writer Domenico Quaranta concluded that the problem was critical professionalism itself: ‘Net Art, after roughly fifteen years of existence, still challenges the evaluation criteria and critical tools available for a mid-career, traditionally trained contemporary art critic.’

Aesthetics has classically depended on the possibility of critical evaluation, and criticism has a bad rep. When art comes along, or so the story goes, aesthetic judgement constrains it. Art is action: aesthetics is critique; art is intuitive, aesthetics is – literally – art-ificial; art is practice; aesthetics is passive spectatorship. The internet messes with this mythic division, and this ‘blurring’ offers radical hope.

Pre-internet thinkers in aesthetics have been unprepared for some of the fundamental shifts in how creative works are produced and consumed online. Internet aesthetics has, in particular, shaken twentieth-century left-wing ideas of the ability of amateur aesthetics to solve the problem of work. Too many contemporary thinkers have also failed to see or value the potential of online creative practices carried out in commercial spaces, often leaving this field to the political right. There is space to reconnect these twentieth-century ideas with the current state of the art.

In the years pre-Web2.0, the role of the offline artist was already changing. Rancière mentions the curatorial aspect of his contemporary aesthetic regime, which ironically preserves the separation of art and life in an attempt to bring them together, describing the process of art-making as the drawing of the unaesthetic into the aesthetic, which works to preserve this division: ‘Art exists as a separate world since anything whatsoever can belong to it.’[19]

Bourriaud merges the roles of artist and curator, and aesthetics become relations: in social practice the location of the art is dispersed from the single artist to the group collective, or expanded to the participatory crowd. The works he mentions may often take place outside traditional art world spaces but, even when the professional artist or curator attempts to decentre

themselves, they still usually remain outside the community they work with – unless they refuse their role.

Sianne Ngai writes that conceptual art has developed ‘an aesthetic of information’, and, ‘Interesting conceptual art was both an instance of and an art about this absorption of modes of circulation into modes of production.’[20] Ngai is looking at networks from the other side, via their records: their spoor of forums, listservs and Wikipedia pages that make this kind of art particularly fit for the museum; collectable, institutionalisable, literally *value*-able, ensuring that informal and immaterial relational art can be studied, categorised, ethnographised, distributed, bought and sold.

Giorgio Agamben has a different perspective: to record is to destroy. But to destroy is to remake: ‘Precisely because he makes alienation from the past into a value, the figure of the collector is in some way related to that of the revolutionary, for whom the new can appear only through the destruction of the old.’[21] Mark Fisher, in his 2009 *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?*, deplores the cultural decontextualisation of the curated gallery or museum but sees no hopeful alternatives online.

Meanwhile, novelty for the amateur curator on Tumblr, Instagram or Pinterest exists neither in the context of hegemonic histories, nor in their decontextualisation, but in pure and random accumulation: the artist as shopper. That the accumulation of seemingly free images exists within the commercial grids of Instagram and Tumblr – grids that resemble displays not of art but of shelved commodities in a boutique or high-end grocery store – may allow some paradoxical freedom from the demands of both capitalism and historicity. This heterogenous eclecticism is the very opposite of Bourdieu’s 1979 *Taste*, which is all about exclusion. It overturns years of the practice of refining selection and organisation according to – and in order to produce – cultural norms, and creates a non-hierarchical, unaesthetic proliferation that necessarily lacks taste, in Bourdieu’s sense. This is not merely an act of destruction, but one that necessarily fails to propose alternative hierarchies (as in, say, what Clement Greenberg called the *purification* of art via the minimalism of the twentieth century). It does

not make anything new. What it refuses to create is an alternative aesthetic culture.

Culture, wrote Herbert Marcuse in 1937, is in any case, the result of 'separating the useful and necessary from the beautiful and from enjoyment', which 'abandons the field to the materialism of bourgeois practice on the one hand and to the appeasement of happiness and the mind within the preserve of "culture" on the other'.[22] In refusing this distinction, online aesthetic work cannot be categorised as culture. Perhaps it's a *subculture*, as described by Dick Hebdige in his 1979 book of that name. Subcultures 'are not "cultural" . . . and the styles with which they are identified cannot be adequately or usefully described as "art of a high degree". Rather they manifest culture in the broader sense, as systems of communication, forms of expression and representation.'[23]

Back at what's still thought of as the beginning of contemporary aesthetics, Kant proposed a *sensus communis*, a kind of imaginary Reddit for aesthetic judgement. The *sensus communis* is an expression of the necessary universal communicability of aesthetic reactions. Inclusive rather than exclusive, it is not just a state of mind but a relational act of creative criticism. Like Luce Irigaray's feminist self, it exists thanks to the question: 'Can we meet? Talk? Love? Create something together? Thanks to which milieu? What between-us?'[24] The online amateur *sensus communis* asks the question: *Do I like this? Do you?*

Criticism was always amateur. Historically the privilege of global-minority men – and a few women – who had the money and time, as well as the passion, for that work. Though it has traditionally separated the critic from the works they engage with, it clearly also belongs, as so much work does now, to the mimetic realm: a work of art in that it is the semblance of work. And online, I am an amateur at being amateur, my practice a mimesis of the critic's amateur professional style. I've not studied aesthetics, nor art history. I've learned everything from the anonymous comfort of my screen.

So I’m not going to write so much about what gets categorised as art, but I might be making it.

I can find no critical history of online amateur aesthetics by a critic who came from that world. Both creatively and critically, I did. We amateurs should write our own history, however unprofessionally.

But I’m also a professional, sort of, as so many amateurs are these days. It’s confusing. Like any fictional amateur, I’m not paid much and, patchily trained, I had little choice but to follow a slow apprenticeship that was not paid at all. Nevertheless, what was formerly informal has become my work. Imitation led, eventually, to formal study and professional qualifications. I now have an academic title, deadlines and a cv, and an email with a signature that links to my current productions. I’m one of the amateurs who made it.

Nevertheless, like so many amateur productions there will be something wrong with this book – something uncomfortable, distasteful. It will be nerdy, obsessive. It will sometimes be the opposite: won’t follow the right protocol. Its knowledge will be patchy, or it will be too much: its deployment of this knowledge will not be smooth. There will be gaps or, conversely, it won’t know when to leave well alone. It will be para-, as in parasocial, paramedic, para-academic. Its reclamation of the left’s canon of Western aesthetic theory – from the Frankfurt School to Cultural Studies, to Post-structuralism and Postmodernism – for online culture is a particularly amateur move, as well as one native to the temporally horizontal spaces of the net. There is nothing more amateur than the pursuit of the professional – as an aesthetic.

Aesthetic is an odd word, but one I’ve chosen carefully. It isn’t quite art but it’s more integral to a work than decoration. Just as online, *like*, as in the *like* button, leads to *like* (as in *repost*, *meme*, *imitate*), it indicates not an instance but a style, not the creation of a single individual, but something recognised, approved and shared.

Can our amateur aesthetic work online bear out Rancière’s claim that ‘perhaps the truly dangerous classes are not so much the uncivilised ones

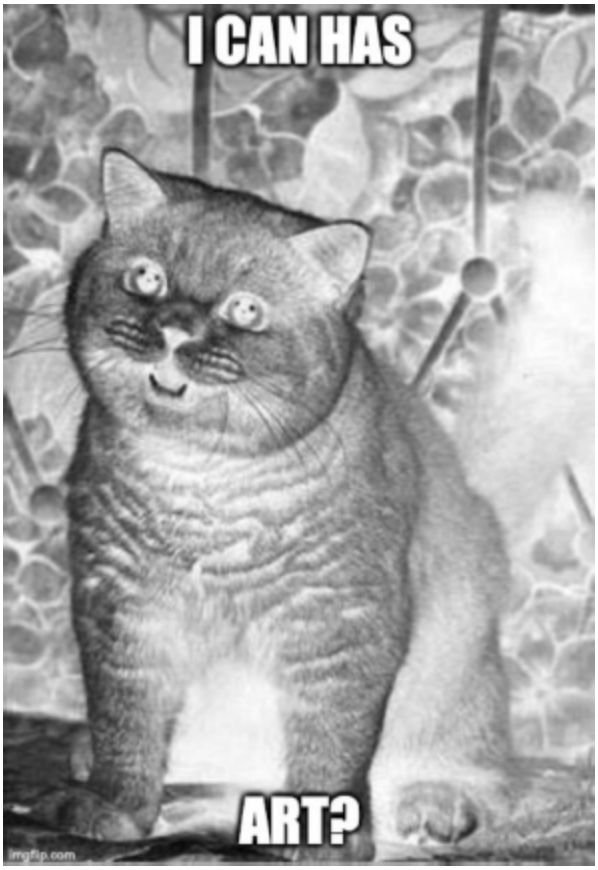
thought to undermine society from below, but rather the migrants who move at the borders between classes, individuals and groups who develop capabilities within themselves which are useless for the improvement of their material lives and which in fact are liable to make them despise material concerns’?[25]

Let’s find out.

2007: Our Aesthetic LOLcats

I thought, this game
Takes precedence over work

Virgil, *Eclogues*



Around the time the LOLcat site icanhascheezburger.com debuted in 2007, the American critic Sianne Ngai began to define *Our Aesthetic Categories* in a series of academic papers published as a book in 2012. Ngai's categories were 'interesting' – a sorting response to information overload;

‘zany’, an often racialised performance of precarity in the face of capitalism, which is something to do with production; and ‘cute’ – an infantilised and infantilising expression of ‘minorness’ that merges the commercial commodity with the commodified self in an aesthetic of consumption. Despite its publication year, Ngai’s book was not about the internet.

A LOLcat, for anyone who’s been on a media-free retreat for the last twenty years, is a photo of a cute cat (or cats) accompanied by a disjunctive slogan written in wonky, zany English. It’s an image macro, a mutable combination of picture and text passed round the internet on forums and social media. LOLcats are the paradigm of early-internet creative practice, exemplifying the net’s links between aesthetics and economics, and Ngai’s aesthetic categories are key to understanding their creation, reception and circulation.

As well as looking cute, a LOLcat’s production process is zany: fast-paced, competitive, nose-to-tail (producer and consumer are often one). The aesthetic reactions LOLcats produce are also cute and zany: an adorable image provokes babytalk; a zany catchphrase, a hyper response – ‘!!!!’[1]

To like was already *the* framework for online experience, but it also means *similar to*, which also means *meme*. Biologist Richard Dawkins coined the term meme in *The Selfish Gene* (1976): ‘a noun that conveys the idea of a unit of cultural transmission, or a unit of imitation’. LOLcats’ evolutionary unit of imitation is linguistic. The images don’t change much, but the initial ‘I can has cheezburger?’ rhizomed into ‘I can has X?’, then, ‘I can no have Y?’, then departed from the original phrase altogether, though its recognisability as a LOLcat has come to rely less on the initial phrase than on an identifiable style of writing – LOLspeak – that also relates to the languages of other non-LOLcat image macros.

A meme seems to have no beginning or end, and its rules transpire through practice. The text on a LOLcat can be changed; the cat itself can be changed – it’s still a LOLcat. This is meming. The game is that the user changes an aspect of the work but the overall meme remains governed by a

defined, evolving, aesthetic: LOLcats' font is usually recognisably blocky and frames the photo, top and base. The style of photography is visibly amateur and (rarely used) Photoshopped elements are noticeably clunky. Cheezburger developed out of an exchange of funny cat pics between the site's founders Eric Nakagawa and Kari Unebasami, they said, 'after a bad day at work'. The founders had jobs in software development, but Cheezburger was made off the clock. It was an amateur project.

Commercial platforms reward us and themselves when we play. The initially not-for-profit Cheezburger was quickly monetised when it was bought by web entrepreneur Ben Huh in 2007, as the site's popularity became too much for the founders to handle after only a few months online. 'I didn't like my job,' Huh said in an interview in 2009. 'I wanted to leave, and this was a great excuse to leave and have my own company.'[2] Like many Web 2.0 sites, Huh didn't charge users but profited via ads that relied on site traffic, which had already doubled after Nakagawa added a rating function: visitors could not only post LOLcats but score them out of five, voting the top macros by awarding them 'cheezburgers'.[3]

Judgement is what makes aesthetic categories *ours*. In our online era, physically dispersed networks are created by the act of aesthetic judgement, via what Kant would have called a *sensus communis*: 'The understanding can, by comparing the object with other people's judgment about their liking of it, make a universal judgment.'[4] Post-Kant, critics have continued to balance the aesthetic experience between the creator and viewer, but none has described a situation in which the artist and judge are identical. Meming is at once a creative and a critical act, and a meme is better defined not as a single instance of an image macro but as its evolution over time via the creative response of its audience. One person cannot make a meme. If meming uses aesthetics to grow a community, the community, as much as the image produced, is the work.

But the LOLcats community did not start with Cheezburger. The origin of LOLcats as an amateur and spontaneous practice is claimed by 4chan's Caturday, which began in in 2005. Christopher Poole, a.k.a. moot, 4chan's

founder, speaking at the Paraflows Urban Hacking Festival in Vienna, 2009, explained that 4chan's success as a 'Meme Factory' (note the workplace metaphor) was down to the fact that 'the site has no memory'. Users are anon. Instead of registering, they can self-authenticate via tripcodes, or they can simply post without identification, and many do, rendering 'Anonymous' not a single person but a collective.

Crowd anonymity cuts several ways. Of the Cheezburger creators, Unebasami remained anonymous for longest, posting under the name Tofuburger until April 2008, after threats from 4chan members who considered LOLcats their exclusive creation. Unebasami is a woman, and 4chan was already well known for misogynist hate campaigns, the most notorious being the subsequent 2014–15 #gamergate, which targeted women in the games industry with rape and murder threats, during which haters were protected by their anonymity.

In 2009, Huh admitted: 'The origin of LOLcats came from an Internet forum called 4chan, which is a NSFW [not safe for work] place. And these images over the year had made it to other forums around the Internet. So, when the two co-founders came along, they didn't know the origin.'[5] Neatly offloading responsibility for this oversight onto Unebasami and Nakagawa, Huh also implies that anonymous content is ripe for financial exploitation.

The anonymity of meming is the opposite of what took place in the art world of the twentieth century, in which the author, artist or auteur despite, or perhaps because of, an increased acceptance of the use of anonymous/found material, became the locus of a work's critical and financial value. When the author of a meme is also the critic – not only as rater but as creative respondent, taking the meme and running with it – what happens to the value of aesthetic judgement, and the work's corresponding financial value?

On July 30 2014, an Anon posted on 4chan's /pol/ (politically incorrect) board:

Art used to be something to cherish
Now literally anything could be art
This post is art.

The post was photographed and framed by another user who posted the photo as a reply. The original post was sold on eBay for $90,900.[6] The post was noticed retrospectively because of its auction value: no surprise, art often is. A copycat auction was launched and failed to attract interest but a screenshot of the original auction was bid up to $50,000. The copycat auction didn't get bids because, unlike the screenshot, which inserted another layer of media and irony, it was merely a copy. It did not move the joke along. It repeated but didn't meme. The screenshot sold not because it was an original, but precisely because it was not.

Memes are valuable neither because of their originality, their provenance, nor their proximity to the source or context of original production. Memes turn 'exhibition value' – which Walter Benjamin suggested in his 1935 essay 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' is created by a rare encounter with the aura of a traceable original – into what I'd call *exhibition valuelessness*, in which the currency of originality is devalued along with the currency of an originator – both radical gestures.

Twentieth century art's claim to the radical has often been made via the recuperation of anonymous industrial multiples, from Duchamp and Freytag-Loringhoven's readymades to Warhol's Brillo boxes, but memes shift the role of artist from individual curator of the mass-produced, to mass-producer. Aesthetic value is created, not by bringing the non-aesthetic into a limited-edition art environment, but by dispersing it via the limitless reproduction and repetition of the meme factory. And there is no factory boss. A meme is valuable because of its flexibility and its popularity. The more it is passed around, the more it is tweaked, the higher its value. A joke used to be a oneliner, only funny if original, the best-value punchline operating with economy. Now it is necessarily a multiliner, and its value relies on that most internet of practices, 'sharing'. To get the joke, the end

user has to be able to see not how it is funny in an original way – or how much funnier it is than the original – but how funny it is in the context of its range of iterations. The algorithm of meme value is inverse to the scarcity principle that rules most traditional art markets.

Can you own a meme? In June 2021, the amateur-created Doge meme – a cute image of a Shiba Inu that functions as the locus of grammatically incoherently enthusiastic dog thoughts: *much cold*; *very snow* – was put on the NFT (non-fungible token) market by the owner of the original doge, Atsuko Sato. She was claiming ownership of a work that had only existed and gained value via its mass proliferation. It sold on for 1696.9 ETH (Ether, a cryptocurrency), approximately US$4 million at the time.

2021 was the year memes became NFTs: rare bulbs in a contemporary tulipomania – aesthetic digital objects whose exchange value so grossly and quickly inflated that their economic trajectory itself became their aesthetic. The thing was not to appreciate or even to own one of these ‘tulips’, but to be able to buy one, making the networks of purchasers into the work of art. Ironically, NFTs appeared to be an attempt to restore the Benjaminian ‘aura’ of a non-reproducible original via blockchain encryption that ensured traceable ownership. Despite their virtuality, these NFTs were one-shot originals and were often made by professional artists. Still their structure remained pure meme, dependent both on their status as transferrable digital iterations, and on their pursuit of an anti-aesthetic aesthetic. Often deliberately ugly or basic, many mimicked the appearance of work produced outside the traditional systems of art schools, galleries and museums. NFTs were more valuable the more ‘unaesthetic’ their appearance, the more amateur and aleatory-seeming their creation. It was this narrative that was on sale.

The *New Inquiry* editor Charlie Markbreiter, interviewing OK Fox, host of the *Art and Labor* podcast, in September 2023, characterised NFTs as

> one of many failed attempts to monetize the internet; which, in this case, meant creating a system of exchange value around aspects of internet culture which had previously just existed online for free as e.g. memes . . . It's been easy enough for NFT artists to cherry-pick these fan visuals and turn them into private property, giving them the patina of culture, if not the social capital of 'good taste'. And, like all forms of gentrification, the fandom to NFT pipeline performs a political function as well, defanging former sites of counter-hegemonic, or at least ambivalent, socialization.[7]

NFTs were not memes but a failed attempt to control memes by according them financial value. The market quickly became oversupplied – something that can hardly happen with genuine memes whose value rests on their proliferation – and value fell. Don't forget that the investors' acronym for highly liquid and unstable profitable commodities is SWAG, or Silver, Wine, Art, Gold. Conglomerates bought low then bid up random NFTs that became worthless within weeks, days or hours.[8] Their fall, like their rise, was less to do with aesthetics than speculation. They boomed during lockdown, but crashed only a year later as the bored primates who'd invested moved on, leaving many creators out of pocket.

Although pre-internet professional creators rarely received the biggest profits from the ownership of copyright on their books or films, the creator remained a crucial figure for locating a body of work. 'It would be pure romanticism', Michel Foucault wrote in 1969, 'to imagine a culture in which the fictive would operate in an absolutely free state, in which fiction would be put at the disposal of everyone and would develop without passing through something like a necessary or constraining figure.'[9] Paul Ricoeur, asking in the early 1980s 'What Is a Text?', had similar reservations. 'The book divides the act of writing and the act of reading into two sides, between which there is no communication.'[10] The authorless meme, 'at the disposal of everyone', reclaims text not only as speech act but as an invitation to creative communication.

Ricoeur could not have predicted a media through which a work could be collaborative, unauthored, unlimited. As Foucault suggested, ‘it is time to study discourses not only in terms of their expressive value or formal transformations but according to their modes of existence’, via ‘the modes of circulation, valorization, attribution, and appropriation of discourses vary with each culture and are modified within each’.[11]

This is where Sianne Ngai’s third aesthetic category, *interesting*, comes in. Interest is produced when something happens to the ‘author function’: ‘What is properly interesting in literary studies’, Ngai writes, is what Steven Knapp identified as a ‘gap between authorial intention and literary content’. So, interest is an invitation to interpretation – to aesthetic judgement. If traditional literary productions – books, journalism, screenwriting – have named authors whose intent can be inferred, anonymous online content lacks a Foucauldian author who ‘marks the manner in which we fear the proliferation of meaning’.[12] It’s ‘interesting’ to note that interest is also a financial term: the author figure does not only limit the meaning of the text, but is used to create and limit its monetary value.

It is difficult to accrue financial interest using anonymous and communal online creations. For the same reason it is difficult for them to produce aesthetic interest via a gap between the author’s known intent and the work’s content. Instead they produce interest via friction between content and form. One networked coincidence or not, Huh, the owner of Cheezburger, also owns Know Your Meme, the site that more or less codified amateur internet aesthetics. (*Interestingly*, Know Your Meme was started with the aim of tracing memes and crediting their originators, and though it eventually became monetised/professional, as with Cheezburger, its creators initially worked on the site as a side project.) Again, Huh was not the originator of the site, but acquired it in 2011. At first named ‘the Rocketboom Entity for Internet Studies’, whose title riffs on offline structures of knowledge-wrangling, it created ‘interest’ by using the serious form of the meatspace encyclopaedia to define ‘trivial’ online content.

This friction between content and form resembles what the art critic Claire Bishop described in *Disordered Attention* (2024) as ‘research-based art’: artwork that parodies or pastiches the overwhelm of digital knowledge systems and data capitalism. Bishop was writing about work that existed in gallery spaces. Online, information capitalism is parodied (or parried) by entities that resemble offline structures but are populated by (dis)information invented for the purpose of creating the purely self-referential networks within which it circulates. If Ngai defined ‘our’ aesthetic categories as persistently minor alternatives to the big ideas of the sublime and the beautiful, these are our similarly minor encyclopaedias, and their parodic nature is vital.

As Judith Butler wrote in their 1998 essay ‘Merely Cultural’, parody is what ‘could not have happened if there were not this prior affiliation and intimacy, and that to enter into parody is to enter into a relationship of both desire and ambivalence’.[13] Know Your Meme parodies information structures from which amateurs have historically been excluded: the university, its libraries and its education in professional research techniques. Exclusion seizes on learning’s exoskeleton, half in admiration, half in mockery.

But parody is not the same as pastiche: it involves a greater leap of creativity. A parody must be both recognisably derivative but also recognisably original, which is why it vexes copyright laws, interfering with ownership and profit. The Rocketboom Entity undermined not only conventional systems of information but their trading value. Although under Huh, Know Your Meme became a profitable enterprise, it still uses Wiki software, developed for the not-for-profit encyclopaedia, and is structured according to that most offline of metaphors. A knowing wink to the twentieth-century scenario about travelling salesmen landing unwary households with mounting down payments on paper bricks they’ll never read, Know Your Meme is not only a pun on information culture, but a joke about economics.

Bishop's 'research-based art' is defined not only as a reaction to information overload, but to the compulsory self-quantification that artists (like everyone else) increasingly face in order to make a living: the recent and steep professionalisation of the arts via self-documentation, from compulsory PhDs in order to teach, to grant proposals, to project reports. Much of the art Bishop describes plays with volume, repetition and space to provoke a feeling of overload. What Bishop calls the 'spectator' is no longer expected to process all this information. Spectatorship stops being an activity and becomes, itself, a performance.

Nevertheless, 'research-based art' leans into the 'epistemophilic feeling' – the love of knowledge – that Ngai claims is essential to 'interest', and which is converted by Know Your Meme to what I could call a para-epistemophilic feeling, a feeling toward a feeling, or toward the amateur performance of one. This performance, in Bishop's art gallery, or online on Know Your Meme, is 'a way', as Ngai wrote, 'of linking feeling-based judgements to concept-based explanations under the radar'.[14] Know Your Meme slyly inverts this hierarchy, giving openly cute and zany affective content the structure of a concept-based legacy institution (this joke itself has roots in legacy media: see the long-running Warner Bros cartoons gag, the ACME Corporation, which has given a parodic Sears Catalog legitimacy to a range of wacky products since the 1930s). The structure becomes the material of the joke. This is only partly parody, as Know Your Meme has a genuine intent to catalogue internet practice, but its broad, private wink to Wikis on more legit topics make it a work of art *about* structures of knowledge.

Both the 'concept-based explanation' and the para-epistemophilic feeling are necessary to Kant's categorisation of an experience as aesthetic: 'If art merely performs the acts that are required to make a possible object actual, adequately to our *cognition* of that object, then it is *mechanical* art; but if what it intends directly is [to arouse] the feeling of pleasure, then it is called *aesthetic* art.'[15] Kant goes one further: it 'is agreeable art if its purpose is that the pleasure should accompany presentations that are mere *sensations*;

it is fine art if its purpose is that the pleasure should accompany presentations that are *ways of cognizing*', something that Know Your Meme's multilayered expression gets perfectly.[16]

Know Your Meme creates aesthetic interest, but Kant wrote that an experience only counts as aesthetic if it's *disinterested*. He meant that an aesthetic experience can't be commercial – we can't desire to own it, or use it, or profit from it. In the internet age (as pre-internet) this is very questionable. So much of what has counted as aesthetic was always for sale, or has been selling something else, and has still provided aesthetic feels. But both Know Your Meme and the free Wiki structures it parodies are not only free at the point of delivery but rely on *useless* engagement, outside work hours or as an escape from work. Constantly inviting clickthrough, they also lean into the distancing nature of Ngai's aesthetic category of interest. Know Your Meme's parodic structure holds its objects at a safe investigatory distance, without the destructive enthusiasm of Ngai's 'zany' or the certainly *interested* (in Kantian terms) aesthetic appreciation of the 'cute' that are easily triggered by the material it categorises.

Arthur Schopenhauer wrote, in response to Kant, that disinterested aesthetic contemplation gives us a break from desire. Schopenhauer's disinterest is not a lack of interest but, like Lacan's *jouissance*, comes from too much fun – a zany or cute sublimity of fun, perhaps – that generates pain. In a 2000 paper that would become a chapter in *Ugly Feelings*, Ngai links disinterest, via boredom, to something she calls stuplimity, a similar linguistic stupefaction provoked by an overwhelm that sounds like Kant's 'mathematical' or magnitudinal sublime. Stuplimity provokes a distancing interest as a way of coping with art that overloads, much as Kant's sublime, when experienced at a safe distance, provokes a coping reaction of creative conceptualisation. Following this line of thought, boredom can provoke 'interest' as a similarly creative response.

'Few savvy, postmodern readers', Ngai writes, 'are likely to admit to being "bored" by *The Making of Americans*.'[17] Ngai highlights the 'thick'

language in Gertrude Stein's thick tome, which produces an effect that she calls 'simultaneously astonishing and boring'. Ngai describes this language using words including *thickening*, *duration*, *endurance*, *piling* and *stacking* – leading to a *stuplime* overwhelm of density, magnitude, simultaneity. This seemingly mindless volume, repetition and mistake are all meme qualities. But memes also use withdrawal and minimalism, creating gaps between the image and the language, which the viewer is invited to fill either by interpretation or by modulating the meme (or both). Ngai describes Stein's technique as 'a tactics of resistance to dominant systems of sense-making'.

Memes, like Kant's sublime, challenge us to use language to bridge a gap of understanding, but they also draw attention to the gap between understanding and language with their noticeable faults. Like the creative response provoked by the sublime, a LOLcat figures what cannot be figured. Or, rather, it performs this non-configuration, displacing meaning into an opaque image-text interplay that incites repetition, in order to try to make sense – or perhaps just to enjoy the non-sense. Via repetition, memes become a social ritual that resembles Walter Benjamin's pre-mechanical-reproduction 'cult image': a non-mass-produced religious or cultural icon whose anonymous, beyond-aesthetic qualities are not destroyed even in the age of modernist art when 'the uniqueness of the phenomena which hold sway in the cult image is more and more displaced by the empirical uniqueness of the creator or of his creative achievement'.[18]

'Repetition' (Ngai quotes Lacan) 'demands the new', but memes teach us to expect the unexpected only in the context of what already exists. 'Everything, then, begins', as Derrida teases, 'with citation'.[19] All memes rely on citation and modulation, but snowclones are memes that, in particular, riff on the clichés of professional writing. The name comes from the journalistic cliché: 'Eskimos have X words for snow.' Mistake in the snowclone is a proof of humanity, but this humanity only exists in the context of the stock phrase, just as a snowclone's innovation only works in the context of its vehicle's non-originality.

MetaLOLcat snowclone by Dave Goehring, which also riffs on the ‘im in ur base’ meme.

Is this a ‘weak’ aesthetic? One that not only admits of, but is based in, error? A meme’s transgression of the borders of stable meaning is the guarantee of its circulation. Memes’ delight in language that is slightly wrong is not a mistake, or perhaps it’s like the critic Walter Percy’s 1958 description of ‘metaphor as mistake’: the bringing together of two concepts in a poetic disjunction that engages the reader in an act of creative translation.

Ngai’s stuplimity, ‘undermining conventional patterns of grammar, syntax, and sense, threatens the limits of self by challenging its capacity for response’.[20] LOLcats may be ‘dumb’, but their stuplime language both demands and defies response. If they ask a question, it is rhetorical, or just plain orthogonal. Their dumbness is insolent, their humour subaltern. They are a call to modulation that inevitably threatens the limits of self as a single speaker/originator of language. The text on a LOLcat often appears to be a

commentary on the cat, while simultaneously seeming to be spoken by it, rendering LOLcats a critique of mediated expression.

It's no accident that the creators of LOLcats understand what it is to be linguistic outsiders. Huh was born in South Korea and moved to the US, where he 'got a degree in a language I didn't speak because I felt something in the power of media that attracted me'.[21] Unebasami and Nakagawa are based in Hawaii, the only US state to have two official languages: colonial English and native Ōlelo Hawai'i, officially recognised as a state language in 1978. The majority of Hawaiians also speak pidgin, an interlanguage first recognised on the US Census in 2015. Most pidgins were created to facilitate international trade, but Hawaiian Pidgin is not a traditional pidgin – it did not cross borders but was developed internally as a common language between plantation workers and bosses.

In 2008, *Wired* magazine called Lolspeak 'kitty pidgin', a term Huh repeated in an interview in 2009.[22] Lolspeak is an online language but refers to workplace languages of a particular offline kind. It's no accident that the Cheezburger spinoff, Engrishfunny, posts photos of mostly East Asian mistranslations of written English, and that most of the posts are workplace notices. As in Lolspeak, the joke is 'dumb', not spoken but written. Huh called Lolspeak 'the formation of a new language basically through Internet, which hasn't really happened before'. As Lolspeak is a purely written language, 'when people ask me to read aloud a lolcat caption, I actually decline to do so, because I don't want to ruin what they have in their heads'.[23]

There are no personal notes on Engrishfunny – it's not so funny to point out a mistake between individuals in private – but there are shop and public service notices: handbills, posters, flyers. These are communications in pidgin situations. Bathroom signs are inevitably popular and most of the humour relies on accidental scatology or mild innuendo. There is an attention to the small-scale: handwritten, half-assed, wonky printouts; a mom-n-pop-shop aesthetic – big-business billboards would not be the same kind of funny. These semi-impersonal strategies displace mockery with

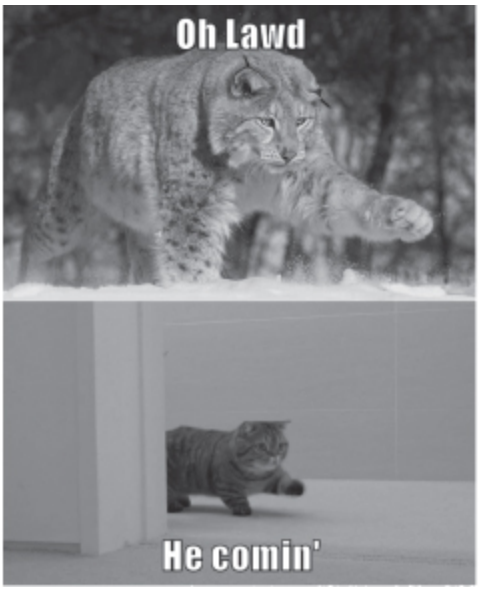
affection, but there’s no doubt they are host to some of what Ngai called ‘ugly feelings’.

If LOLspeak is a pidgin, who are the LOLcats workers, and who is the boss? If LOLcats invite the mild aesthetic engagement of *liking*, they also rely on the idea of a cat behaving and speaking *like* a human. LOLcats speak a language that is *like* standard English, but rather more like that of non-standard English, L2 (second-language), or cultural minority speakers. Ngai’s aesthetic categories are particularly racialised, and there’s a long and terrible history of racialised material used as entertainment in online (and offline) media, as Legacy Russell explores in her 2024 book *Black Meme*. The online iteration has rightly been criticised as ‘digital blackface’.[24]

The push-pull created by racially identified phrases that have been kitschified by mediated detachment from any original speaker recalls Ngai’s ‘animatedness’, a racialised ‘ugly feeling’ closely allied to her zany aesthetic category, both of which she associates with depictions of black Americans. This kind of meme usually operates via borrowings from what is now called legacy media: images from TV, film, comics that are used because that particular moment seems over and is available for ‘ironic’ (and I use ironic scare quotes) reuse.

Blackface memes contain irony, but it is seldom irony that criticises a painfully racialised situation. The irony shifts to the outdatedness of the aesthetic, legitimising the repetition of similarly retro attitudes and giving racism a free pass. There’s no getting round the fact that several strands of LOLcats are part of this discourse.

This decontextualised online repetition of phrases associated with racialised or second-language English-speakers is typically used in reaction memes to express emotions considered too ‘cute’ or ‘zany’ for white expression. It indicates not so much a surplus feeling as the performance of a surplus desire to feel, creating an aesthetic that could be called affectiness.



A LOLcat from cheezburger.com (the phrase doesn't change for this sub-meme, but the photo does). The 'Oh Lawd He comin' ' meme typically celebrates 'chonk' cats but is clearly related to the digital blackface reaction meme 'What's going on in this thread?'

The surplus feeling affectiness produces, when the labour of the meme-maker meets the labour of the viewer – who meets the meme with a capacity to feel in their wallet – is carried over with each modulation as emotional interest accrued. As these feelings are never 'cashed in' offline, they continue to circulate in the aesthetic realm via the repetition and modulation of images and text.

Though there are clear links between the stuplimity of LOLspeak and the language of digital blackface, LOLcats don't directly quote external media either visually or lexically but are hermetic, feeding only off other LOLcats. That the speakers are now cats creates an 'interesting' distance, explaining LOLcats' popularity with L2 speakers like Huh as a safe space for playing out and playing with 'mistake', a mechanism that is matched by LOLcats' tendency to depict cute #fails. If 4chan's memes are designed to provoke LULz (schadenfreude) not LOLs, LOLcats' #fails invite indulgence while simultaneously acting as a vehicle for the viewer's/memer's feelings of powerlessness.

‘This recycling of sounds, images, and forms implies incessant navigation within the meanderings of cultural history, navigation which itself becomes the subject of artistic practice,’ wrote Nicolas Bourriaud in *Postproduction* (2002). Like *Our Aesthetic Categories*, despite its publication date, Bourriaud’s is not a book about the net; it is about professional art that ‘does not position itself as the termination point of the “creative process” (a “finished product” to be contemplated) but as a site of navigation, a portal, a generator of Activities’ (with a capital A).[25] Bourriaud’s description of remix art in the meatspace professional art world may be communal but it is not anonymous and almost always seeks remuneration via sales, grants and gallery shows. ‘What if’, he suggests, ‘artistic creation today could be compared to a collective sport?’[26] Sport exists at the intersection of play and work. It is a game. You might *play* sport, but a game is won. It has rules and is often professional. To gamify work has become a strategy for the sort of employers who demand affective labour. Gamification is itself a form of affective labour, demanding the kind of personal investment that workers more usually put into leisure activities.

Ngai’s zany was originally a mime; now she’s a meme. S/he is often a man doing affective, feminised labour that blurs the boundaries between work and play – sometimes in drag, to point up the joke (Ngai drags up Richard Pryor’s performance in the movie *The Toy*). S/he is an amateur who plays at being pro, like *I Love Lucy*’s Lucille Ball, a professional comedian playing an untrained housewife compelled to imitate a range of professional tasks. Ngai’s zany was a hyperFordist creation, but her ambiguous status on the edges of professional work makes her an even more appropriate figure in the online world of self-starting, self-producing and self-archiving (not to mention self-financing) aesthetic creation. Ngai’s zany knew that, even pre-internet, games were not always fun. Or, as Herbert Marcuse wrote in *One Dimensional Man*: ‘The Happy Consciousness has no limits – it arranges games with death and disfiguration in which fun, teamwork, and strategic importance mix in rewarding social harmony.’[27]

From Georges Perec's terrifying games in *W* (a narrative that alternates chapters drawn from the author's childhood memories as a Jew in occupied Paris with a speculative fiction about a games-structured dictatorship on a remote island), to Suzanne Collins's 2008 *Hunger Games* (the author was inspired by channel surfing between game shows and footage of the 2003–11 Iraq War), to the 2021 Netflix series *Squid Game* and its disturbing IRL 2023 spinoff *Squid Game: The Challenge*, games are not always fun – or rather, they are fun as an expression of power.

If Ngai's *zany* responded to work by becoming its expression, LOLcats' response is very different. Its brand of fun is lethargic, disinterested, uninterested: like Melville's slacker antihero Bartleby, it *would prefer not to*. Shortly after Cheezburger launched, its founders considered folding because it quickly became 'too much work'.[28] Maybe it stopped being fun as soon as it stopped being play. While professional art may be a game, I'd like to think about the valences of amateur play. 'Play's freedom is contrasted to the "game" of work. Play takes place against rules and games tend towards rules,' writes Jacques Rancière.[29] The kind of play involved in memes deliberately distances itself from art, and in doing so refuses to take itself seriously in a very serious way.

Rancière is talking not only about play as opposed to work but about Kantian free play – purposive purposelessness – that is at the root of all aesthetic acts. LOLcats answer both these meanings, and their play between text and image (and within the text) evokes another meaning of play – play as the elasticity of a situation. LOLcats' humour hinges on their difference and repetition, both the internal friction between text and image, and their presence within online structures. They depend for their meaning on interplay with other LOLcats, but also on their position in a larger internet landscape, in which cute LOLcats are the opposite of what's termed Not Safe For Work. NSFW itself depended on the meatspace situation in which LOLcats emerged: on the use of shared workplace computers in an era when personal laptops were hardly a thing, never mind smartphones. 'Let's face it,' says the strapline for Cheezecake – Cheezburger's subsite for racier

content – ‘if you’re searching NSFW, you are either very brave, very alone, or very at home.’ But even this non-work content, besides being contextualised by work, is couched in terms of labour: ‘If you are that industrious employee who doesn’t stop at a puny firewall, journey forward and indulge in everything raunchy rowdy and anything in between.’[30]

NSFW is generally shorthand for sexual content, but seldom for violence. Ngai’s examples of cute are usually gender-amorphous and barely sexual, but ‘cute’ and ‘cheesecake’ – in the US in particular – are synonymous with ‘sexy’, especially when used to describe women, and much NSFW content is played out across idealised or exaggerated images of ‘cute’ women’s bodies. But the whole idea of NSFW is itself kind of cute, its cuteness residing in the assumption not only that your work is not sex work, but also in the improbable idea that work takes place in a non-sexual space.

The existence of NSFW implies that work is a safe space. The kind of pleasure LOLcats give is very ‘safe for work’, because posting LOLcats is something people do at work. NSFW sets up work as the paradigm of existence and tells us that it is outside. What is outside work? Everything that is not LOLcats, which are made on breaks from work. What is work then? Everything that is *not* not safe for work. Work is a space that needs to be kept safe. Where once leisure was a sacred space, now work is. Where once we worked to be at leisure, now we make fun memes at work. LOLcats were made to be consumed at work, in timed comfort breaks, in secretly open windows, which were just as secretly allowed – though it was a secret everyone knew, generating a guilty pleasure that kept us on the job.

Flarf was founded as a kind of poetry LOLcats but its vibe is very different. Founder Gary Sullivan proposed Flarf as NSFW: ‘Wrong. Un-P.C. Out of control. Not okay.’ Operating via image macros without the images, the process, flarf poet Mike Magee writes, is to ‘search Google for 2 disparate terms, like “anarchy + tuna melt” [and] using only the quotes captured by Google (never the actual websites themselves) you stitch words, phrases, clauses, sentences together to create poems’.[31]

Drew Gardner, author of ‘one of the most famous Flarf poems’, ‘Chicks Dig War’, wrote: ‘Flarf is essentially a form of play, a way of “fucking around on the man’s dime”.’[32] This might be the literal dime, like workers making LOLcats when they could be on a smoke break. It might be the poetry dime (as even poetry has economic structures), or just the evoked general dimeyness of life. Flarf may be opposed to work, but it is not integrated into work as LOLcats are.

Just as work and NSFW recursively embed each other, Ngai links the graspable cute to the abject shit, via externalised objects which must be managed, sorted, embraced or rejected with a Freudian anal-stage delight/repulsion. Having *a whole load of shit to do* is the kind of work that, objectified, can get cute. The pile-of-poo emoji, first appearing in 1997, is undoubtedly the cutest, embodying, as it does, the final stages of consumption, while simultaneously enticing us to rush towards it as repeat consumers, its shit-eating grin inviting a Ngai-esque squishy hug.

The poomoji, as it appears on Twemoji, for use on Twitter, Discord, Roblox, Nintendo Switch and others. *Source*: Wikicommons

Let’s face it: work in the LOLcats era might have been shit, but by today’s standards, it was cute. And work has got both cuter and less safe. If LOLcats-era work was the discourse, LOLcats were its legitimising internal commentary. If ‘the aesthetics of the sublime is’, as the French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard wrote, ‘indeterminate: a pleasure mixed with pain, a

pleasure that comes from pain', then LOLcats are a minor expression of a minor pain.[33] Why is their expression of pain so cute? Because it is a reaction to an 'absolutely large object' – what Timothy Morton has called a 'hyperobject' – that was at the same time completely underwhelming: the old-timey office. Old-timey because LOLcats were founded in a world of work that was already becoming obsolete: *The Simpsons*' world, where one low-grade, yellow-collar wage could support a family and that was still something to grouch about. Or maybe that was always a trope of the legacy-media world that show inhabits, as it was made in an era when that sort of job was rapidly being replaced. Our aesthetic LOLcats point at the idea of community outside their online networks, or at the idea of work displaced in time as well as space (nostalgia for the cubicle, the myth of the water cooler, the sitcom world of work) from the gig economy we currently inhabit.

Now, both the discourse and its commentary are cute: zero hours combine with dress-down Fridays, work-from-home with employee-monitoring software. Of course, office jobs are a specific type of work, which increasingly has a hidden dark side: the hi-tech software-development offices of big data in privileged urban centres worldwide are a front for the traditional sweatshops where the components they rely on are mostly manufactured. There is nothing virtual about the virtual.

LOLcats are not so much an expression of the refusal of work as a desire to be at work, but at a leisurely pace, uncommitted, painfully pleasurable. LOLcats are not a violent revolution but a go-slow or, in its more contemporary iterations: quiet quitting, bullshit jobs, lazy-girl careers, #fails.

Cheezburger's para-site, Fail Blog, expanded from photos of #fails (verb becomes noun) to whole narratives.[34] Most of these narratives are not about the failure of the poster, but their revenge against a system that has failed them. In fact, it's a success blog. Popular stories regularly include the exposure of cheats (financial or amorous) or achievement against the odds – in the face of bad teachers, bad customers, bad bosses. The posters are the

losers of the world, classic underdogs, although most present as culturally mainstream: straight and white. The watchword is malicious compliance. Customer service comes up a lot, with heroes more likely to be the call centre employee than the customer, the waiter not the diner. Punishments are social, and usually passive-aggressive. They are also almost always enacted offline, most often in the meatspace workplace: it's almost as if the internet doesn't exist (apart perhaps from dating sites), other than as a medium for stories about water-cooler feuds and sour office romance.

Is it possible to have fun at work? Both 4chan and Cheezburger's posts are predicated on or excused by 'fun', from the bully's mantra, 'where's your sense of humour?' to Cheezburger's performative mildness. Is this just a distraction from a work world that increasingly asks for our personal investment and affective compliance? Mark Fisher responded to the culture of always-on networked capitalism by lamenting the end of boredom: 'when no one is bored, everything is boring', and 'if boredom is a form of empty absorption, then more positive forms of absorption effectively counter it. But it is these forms of absorption which capitalism cannot deliver. Instead of absorbing us, it distracts from the boring.'[35]

'Distraction', writes Claire Bishop, 'is not opposed to attention but is a type of attention' dismissed by powers that profit by our paying attention elsewhere.[36] Pre-internet, this was often divided between what was shallow and fleeting (bad), and what required formal study (good), as well as between attention to what could be called trivial (bad) and what could be called serious (good). It was thought impossible to pay 'serious' attention to 'trivial' matters. But online, Fisher's battle for attention is being fought with the same tactics over what looks like the same ground: when everything is trivial, how can we tell whose trivial we're playing with (or is playing with us)? Are we cooing at capital's cute ads, or the subversive cute of amateur memes? Are we being distracted by the jump cuts of YouTube ad breaks, or new ways of telling on amateur TikTok?

Because of their avowed triviality, it would be easy to see LOLcats as works that, as Rancière writes, 'play on the indiscernibility between works

of art and objects or icons of commerce,' and so 'represent the nihilist accomplishment of aesthetic utopia'.[37] But they are the opposite of commercial: made for free, by amateurs, initially on non-commercial platforms, the sort of play involved in making LOLcats utilises distraction as a reclamation of free time. LOLcats may not look like what Rancière calls 'social art' that, eliminating the boundaries between art and life, eliminates itself in the act, and 'by effacing its difference as art, becomes a form of life' – but, in their creation of communities, they are.[38]

The freely given content of LOLcats aims at *content*: Huh said that his sites are 'creating content that makes people happy for just a few minutes a day'.[39] Emotionally, 'content' is not joy or pain, just as content (as in 'subject matter') is not art. Content, in its online meaning of mildly distracting material, ultimately denies its own importance. One piece of content can substitute for another as they both occupy the same minor aesthetic level: they cannot offend, please, provoke or give joy, as is expected from art.

Ngai describes 'interest' as an aesthetic structure with similarly interchangeable content: 'The interesting's lack of definite content is exactly what enables it to move between judgments of aesthetic and nonaesthetic character, creating relays from one to the other'. 'Interest' is in fact a description of permanent distraction, but is an 'aesthetic category' nonetheless, an aesthetic characterised not by what it 'means' or 'looks like' but what it *does* – or rather, in LOLcats' case, doesn't do.

~

I've often seen 'I CAN HAZ . . . ?' misquoted as 'CAN I HAZ . . . ?' Reading the sentence as a pure question makes sense but it isn't quite right, though it would be equally wrong to read it as pure statement. Instead, it expresses a constant cycling of unreconciled wish and fulfilment. LOLcats harness attention, offering a form of distraction via a repetitive structure that is mild, predictable and – yes – ultimately quite dull.

LOLcats provide novelty without excitement, familiarity without sameness. But their never-ending merry-go-round interrupts and parodies the kind of distraction capitalism would like to serve us, the kind that poses as ever-new, that seems to offer a solution to the problems it has, itself, dealt us. LOLcats may not be art, but they are *interesting*, Ngai's persistently minor aesthetic whose hermetic 'free play' allows them to, as Rancière wrote, take 'up a combat against culture'.[40] The worker who produces LOLcats creates a holding space of refusal, a collaborative minor claim on their – on our – own time.

Of all Ngai's claims about cute, zany and interesting, the most important is that these are *our* aesthetic categories. Her refusal to define the *we* in *our* is itself a provocative question about what links us. What defines *us* right now is shared use of the internet where we inhabit enough common space to be able to – despite our unreconciled differences – use a plural pronoun. Online, *our* solidarities are formed via shared creative practice and aesthetic judgement. Playing out far beyond funny cat memes, this internet-native practice was born and raised with LOLcats.

Though still popular, LOLcats, like the work situation that gave birth to them, are old enough to be internet history. Meanwhile, new image macros provide updated cute, zany or interesting responses to our contemporary workplace precarities – a world very different from that portrayed on Cheezburger – like this 2020 multitasking snowclone:

> Off work late? Hungry, but too tired to cook? Try [insert improbable almost non-food, initially '30 to 40 olives']: an easy weeknight dinner. eat them directly out of [insert whatever] with your fingers. you will certainly not regret eating [whatever it is].[41]

Speaklolspeak.com, a Cheezburger spinoff site codifying the tone and vocabulary of the macros, is now a fake-content splash page that suggests that it might be an insurance-comparison site.

Nakagawa now works developing sustainable blockchain.

Unebasami is a baker and pastry cook.

Ben Huh, who claims that LOLcats facilitated ‘a shift in the way people perceived entertainment’, is allergic to cats.[42]

2011: The Old Aesthetic

> *Whatever you now find weird, ugly, uncomfortable and nasty about a new medium will surely become its signature. CD distortion, the jitteriness of digital video, the crap sound of an 8-bit—all of these will be cherished and emulated as soon as they can be avoided. It's the sound of failure: so much modern art is the sound of things going out of control, of a medium pushing to its limits and breaking apart . . . the excitement of witnessing events too momentous for the medium assigned to record them.*
>
> Brian Eno, *A Year with Swollen Appendices*

Of course, everything on icanhascheezburger.com looks cute because the site looks like it was made in 2007, which it was. Not only are the cats cute, but the sidebar, the graphics, the fonts are nostalgic. This is not only apparent now but it was at the time, its style harking back to the amateurism of nineties Usenet clunkiness. But Cheezburger's outdatedness wasn't 'old-fashioned'.

Internet-native aesthetics are nothing new. Or rather, their newness is always nostalgic for the idea of the new, still hopelessly entangled with the idea of the modern. Being a new medium, they take their measure either from or against meatspace. They also bear a frictional relationship – which could be tagged anything from *uneasy* to *fruitful* – to the aesthetics of what has come to be called legacy media.

In the 1990s, the net, along with offline digital platforms, was sometimes called 'new media'. Though it was used to describe the changes in the 2000s that enabled users to develop their own aesthetics via blogging, memes and everything else this book is concerned with, this phrase is still

strongly associated with the media that preceded Web 2.0 live interaction: the top-down, one-way street of edutainment – CD-ROMs that allowed the user to navigate aesthetically enhanced traditional information structures (the encyclopaedia was the aspirational form). The exciting term *new media* was used to sell myriad dull interactive experiences that gathered dust in libraries and schools.

Ought twinned with bought, and the result was ‘content’. We all know what content is: something that can be used to fill a gap. And we all know what it is to *be* content, a kind of flat-affected buzz, without the kick of strong feeling. This new media offered only the limited appearance of agency. Nevertheless, it signalled the expansion of digital aesthetics into a political space where the ethical met the commercial via a kind of (to paraphrase Walter Benjamin) aestheticisation – not of politics in a straightforward sense, but of education. This space was political because new media’s illusion of user control echoed the turn to ‘student experience’ in higher education, a synonym for student-as-customer.

But the real reason these new media products fell flat is that they weren’t really ‘new’. They were media and they used new tech, but they operated like old media models. Even if you clicked instead of leafing through a newspaper or a book, the experience was similar. You couldn’t interact with a CD-ROM in any way that would get a live response from either a human or a machine. This uncomfortable alliance is a version of what’s called *skeuomorphic*, like a digital radio housed in a retro case that has the appearance of old tech. But this time it’s the other way round: it looks new but the system it houses is old.

Nothing sounds older than a new aesthetic. It must have been with a sense of irony that artist/technologist/publisher James Bridle coined the phrase ‘the New Aesthetic’ in 2011. Or maybe not. The New Aesthetic was a project that gazed at the digital gaze. How do machines see things? ‘For so long we’ve stared up at space in wonder,’ Bridle began a post in documentary voiceover mode on his blog, booktwo.org, in 2011, ‘but with cheap satellite imagery and cameras on kites and RC helicopters, we’re

looking at the ground with new eyes, to see structures and infrastructures.' The wonder Bridle expresses evokes new media's attempts at creating wunderkammers but his take is different.

The systems whose aesthetics interested Bridle were often war machines. *Vanity Fair* reported how 'Bridle and his friend and collaborator Einar Sneve Martinussen sat in his East London studio, contemplating a hobbyist's model of an MQ-1 Predator drone. They recognized it not only as an epochal weapon but also as the most dramatic and violent representation of a far broader condition. "It embodies so many of the qualities of the network," Bridle said. "Sight at a distance, action at a distance, and it's invisible". Bridle started thinking about it as an emanation of the network itself – not just a surveillance platform, but a dark mirror." '[1] This is the gaze as action, as violence; the transhuman body (Bridle wanted 'to touch the cold metal of it, to measure oneself against it'), of war machines with all the seductive brutality of Deleuze and Guattari's concept.

On a panel with Bridle at the 2012 SXSW conference, Joanne McNeil, editor of the digital arts magazine Rhizome, said that things like the New Aesthetic 'often happen', as though no human intervention were necessary. Its cool technology appears to have no creators and no victims. But as tech theorist and speculative fictioner Bruce Sterling pointed out in a piece about the panel in *Wired* magazine: 'The aesthetics of surveillance cams are not value-free. Because aesthetics are not value-free.'

Bridle shut his Tumblr, temporarily, in the wake of an overload of reaction to Sterling's piece, which included both criticism of the New Aesthetics' apparently apolitical stance – and an excess of enthusiasm, which might have been down to the way Sterling compared Bridle to both Walter Benjamin and André Breton, codifier of Surrealism, the newest aesthetic of his day. Unlike Surrealism, the New Aesthetic doesn't have a manifesto, as technologist Ian Bogost noted, or perhaps complained, in the *Atlantic*.[2]

Sterling's and Bogost's were the most high-profile responses that forced Bridle to develop some theory around his impulse to collect. In a 2013 blog

post on his site booktwo.org – after what he considered a lot of ‘misreading’ – Bridle laid down some principles. ‘Much of the critical confusion around the New Aesthetic’, Bridle wrote, ‘has clustered around the use of the term “aesthetic”, by which I meant simply, “what it looks like” – I wasn’t even really aware of how key the term aesthetics was to art historical and critical discourse.’[3]

Tumblr, Bridle’s vehicle of choice, is all about ‘what it looks like’: its patchworked, largely wordless squares ensure the images do the talking. Like Kim Kardashian’s pantry or Ikea’s iconic Billy shelving unit, Tumblr’s minimalist grid is particularly suitable for displaying objects, and many Tumblrs are immaterial taxonomies of material cultures. In January 2007, Tumblr’s homepage described itself as ‘blogs with less fuss and more stuff’.

Tumblr began as an out-of-hours, amateur-adjacent project made by developers Marco Arment and David Karp in gaps between contracts. It was based on the wholly amateur 2005 tumblelog project Anarchia, by a seventeen-year-old German high-schooler, Chris Neukirchen. Though blogging platforms had been in existence since the late 1990s, this was the first microblog, its form a stream of titleless status updates that became the basis of Twitter. Tumblelogs were mixed media and relied on an aesthetic of collecting or scrapbooking. Crucially, they were oriented towards quotes and image collection. They changed the nature of blogs from the written to the visual. The emphasis was on ‘reblogging’, or reposting the scrapbooked content of another user. The pressure to produce original material was reduced, and the dopamine hit for users came from the number of reblogs their post accrued (listed under each post). As such they formed networks via shared aesthetics. In 2005, Jason Kottke, a blogger who made it during the first wave of written blogs, described them as ‘almost pure editing’.[4]

The New Aesthetic Tumblr, however, Bridle insisted, was not ‘concerned with beauty or surface’, and therefore was not ‘superficial’. It wasn’t even – despite Sterling’s understandable evaluation of the project as a ‘glitch-hunt’ for pixelated cushions, cake stands, basically anything pixelated – ‘an eruption of the digital into the physical’, an analysis that relied on a belief

that the virtual is separate from IRL.[5] Speaking as a technologist, Bridle claimed to see not the image but its process, its production, its network: ‘Let’s be clear,’ wrote Bridle, the New Aesthetic ‘is concerned with everything that is not visible in these images and quotes, but that is inseparable from them’.

Why was Bridle so keen to jettison the aesthetic from his Aesthetic, separating appearance from system, surfaces from depths, aesthetics from politics? Even taking Bridle at his word, the New Aesthetic is not exactly about ‘what it looks like’, in the sense of how the machine sees because machine processes require the eye of a human, encoding and decoding by humans at both ends. A human programmes the drones; a human interprets their photos, judging what should be noticed. Humans are responsible not only for machine aesthetics but for those aesthetics’ ethics. For example, humans input the parameters that instructed Lavender AI, deployed by Israel against Palestine in 2023, to target suspected Hamas members in their homes, killing not only the unconvicted suspects but their families and neighbours. Bridle’s Tumblr adds a third human/aesthetic layer: his own aesthetic process of noticing, categorising and defining what has been noticed by the human eye of tech.

More than the machine’s depiction of the world, the New Aesthetic was a depiction of a developing methodology of collecting, a depiction that, itself, took place online via the eclectic but linear form of the Tumblr where Bridle collected his images. This is what Sterling meant by his Benjamin comparison. Bridle’s ‘valiant cut-and-paste campaign that looks sorta like traditional criticism, but is actually blogging and Tumblring’ was compared to *The Arcades Project* or *One Way Street*. Again, Bridle’s project was evaluated on its surface aesthetics, on what it ‘looks sorta like’, but it was also about looking, sorting and liking, in a 2013 interview with *Vanity Fair*, Bridle redefined the New Aesthetic as ‘just me, looking at this stuff, and going, “Have you seen this?” ’[6] What began in his 2011 post as a ‘mood-board for unknown products’ plays into what’s been called the curatorial turn in visual art: creative acts of selecting and showing.

Curatorial art is necessarily retrospective, and Bridle admitted that the images he selected were not 'necessarily new new, but I want to put them together'. The new in the New Aesthetic marks an anxious commitment to newness as a good in itself. Bridle's sometime collaborator, digital strategist Russell Davis, blogged in 2010: 'Cafés used to be models of the future. Shiny and modern and pushy. Fashion used to be the same – space age fabrics, bizarre concoctions.'[7] Confronted by the contemporary retrofuturism of steampunk and 'sci-goth'.[8] Davis regretted what was lost without realising the futurism he mourned could only be visited in retro terms. 'We don't want people in fifty years' time to think of 2011 in terms of what we were nostalgic for,' commented another of Bridle's colleagues, web developer Phil Gyford, showcasing the New Aesthetic on his blog.[9] But that's only if you see nostalgia as a purely retrogressive force.

Bridle claimed that humans cannot make new art about technology: 'We just loop over and over through the same fetishisations and reifications.'[10] There is plenty of fetish in the New Aesthetic. Its confidence in the autonomy of the machine gaze prompts an anthropomorphic mode, which, as its machines are never fully beings with agency, renders them, like one of Freud's *unheimlich* dolls, available for queasy adorableness. More interestingly, there's a nostalgia in the way the New Aesthetic highlights technological failure: the point at which, as Bridle wrote, its 'representations of people and of technology begin to break down, to come apart not at the seams, but at the pixels'.[11] Seams on the outside, much of the New Aesthetic looked technological in a retro way – like images and objects we could imagine a robot might make.

Sterling had described the New Aesthetic as a 'movement' in terms that seem pre-internet, structurally retro. The London-centric fruit of 'working creatives of Bridle's generation', it was an avant-garde old-fashioned enough to have a physical and generational as well as cultural location. For an avant-garde to diverge from tradition requires its acknowledgement of the past, and nostalgia for this avant-garde move produces a skeuomorphic feedback loop. If the conventional cycle completes, Sterling predicted, then

‘in 2012, premonitory blogposts; in 2022, solo shows and coffee-table books’. But that didn’t happen. To Bridle’s credit, the New Aesthetic has remained digitally native.

Not made as part of his life as a ‘working creative’, the New Aesthetic remains unprofessional in the best sense. ‘While I would like to, and probably should, produce a book or book-like object at some point,’ Bridle wrote in 2013, ‘it itself would not be “the New Aesthetic”, but a commentary upon some of the issues it raises.’ A manifesto would be ‘the kind of premature codification of the subject that the New Aesthetic explicitly sets out to avoid’. The New Aesthetic is a form of attention about paying attention. And this is not the attention of the machine gaze, or of a network or movement, but of a single artist.

What is Bridle paying attention to now? Still anything where (to paraphrase Henri Bergson’s theory of the comic) the digital is encrusted on the human. And the modus operandi of the New Aesthetic remains that most internet of comic tropes, the visual pun. Robert Jackson at furtherfield.org called it less a movement than a meme.[12] Bridle treats aesthetics as a joke, and the proof of the humanity of the New Aesthetic is that the joke is available to humans. ‘Your mom could get it,’ writes Sterling, locating the creative end of the New Aesthetic as everything *she* is not: professional, young, urban and most likely (given the list of people involved) male.

‘Your mom’ is an interesting figure online. Or rather, she’s offline. And when she’s on, she’s the opposite of a digital native. Of course, no one actually *is* her. She’s a symbol of something excluded, deferred (even moms have, or had, moms). But as the abject of the net, the concept of the clueless – particularly technologically, but also socially, economically and aesthetically – older woman is something to sit with. The stereotype invites you to sit with her, as her ineptitude is twinned with enthusiasm and warmth. But you never can. She may be sitting somewhere, or perhaps not. You don’t know because all you have is an echo of her, via the technology

she uses so badly – because most of all, she wants to communicate, and so much contemporary communication is mediated. She's the author of unintentionally hilarious autocorrects typed slowly with her middle finger, of inappropriately timed phone calls, of disastrous button-pressing. At the time of writing there's a 'your mom' meme generator, as well as a meme about what happens when you show your mom 'your mom' memes.

But *your mom* is more technological than you'd think, as she exists not as location but as message, conveyed or recorded via the latest technology of your day. You carry her in your pocket, whether as envelope, WhatsApp message or voicemail. She troubles you. She is an absent body that insists on staying in touch, and her gauche, friendly communiqués must be dealt with at the most awkward moments (and when is not an awkward moment for an encounter with her?). She can also elicit a fuzzy feeling, fuzzy because warm, like a sweater, but also undefined, unstructured – like a sweater as opposed to the suit of 'working creatives of Bridle's generation'.

As such, there's a danger she'll (s)mother you. Like all monstrous (femme)omina, she contains her opposite. '– your mom', with its silent initial beat, is short for *fuck your mom*, an attack on this sacred cow that in no way desacralises her, as the shock in bringing the two words together (how could a mother have anything to do with fucking?) reinforces the ridiculous notion of the separation of the cultural valences of each.

If *your mom* is every online ineptitude, then Hito Steyerl's 2009 'poor image' is an allied idea, and it's crucial that Steyerl also casts these images as the result of amateur human interaction with technology. 'Poor images' are poor quality, anonymous photos 'dragged around the globe as commodities or their effigies, as gifts or as bounty'.[13] Some of these images are poor because they're faulty human x tech reproductions of *echt* productions (pixelated screenshots, glitchy ripped DVDs); others – blurred, badly angled – incorporate 'your mom' in all her #fail. Maybe she took them. Some also incorporate '– your mom' in their uncanny content. This combination makes for what came to be known as 'cursed images'.

Cursed images became a thing on Tumblr in 2015, a sign that online aesthetics were crucially not only *not* all manufactured via the smooth gaze of the network, but that they came out of human interactions with a much older form of technology: the camera. Though they're mildly disturbing, cursed images are never violent. They're a cosy crime novel, an invitation to solve something played out on a nostalgic, domestic stage. The crime happened long ago, but because it's in the past it can't be prevented and, for the same reason, it will haunt us forever. The cosy body horror of @cursedimages, the Twitter account that posted between July and November 2016 is not only nostalgic for certain pre-internet ideas of human relationships, but also a nostalgia for old media, particularly media used by amateurs (example: a wedding-guest-dressed group wander through a fleshy pink plastic cave with embedded teeth). Many of the photos show animals and humans with alien, flash-reflected eyes. Sometimes there's a joy in doubly signalled aesthetic failure: a badly framed photo of bad art involving a crucifix made of black bin-bags suspending a taped-on plastic doll.

This is not the New Aesthetic's nostalgia for the future – so what kind of nostalgia is this? 'A delight in ruin', wrote nineteenth-century art critic John Ruskin, 'is perhaps the most suspicious and questionable of all the characters distinctively belonging to our temper, and art.'[14] Nostalgia for the failed is ethically questionable because it finds aesthetic interest in someone else's degradation, imperfection and misery.

The picturesque, as Ruskin calls it, is OK when the feelings it evokes are 'noble' – and the examples he gives show that he means this in terms of social and economic class as well as emotional quality. The 'noble picturesque' is a ruined palace; by contrast, what he called the 'surface-picturesque' uses brokenness as a twee aesthetic quality with no 'largeness of sympathy' for anyone who has to live in its tumbledown cottage or wear its cutely patched coat.[15] The art of the surface picturesque elicits not awe, but 'awww', and the artist who makes this sort of image 'is not in the least

sorry for it. On the contrary, he is delighted, and evidently thinks it the most fortunate thing possible.'[16]

Ruskin's noble picturesque is experienced at the same kind of distance as his cuter variant, its noble rot prompting something similar to the Kantian sublime – 'an agreeable kind of horror', as Joseph Addison wrote in 1701.[17] The sublime and the noble picturesque have an orientalising aspect: the first definitions of the sublime came from wealthy English travellers enjoying a glimpse of the vertiginous Alps, not from people who lived there, by whom the landscape appears to be, as Ruskin wrote, 'nobly endured by unpretending strength of heart'.[18] Though Ruskin notes that the picturesque in general is a rebellion against aesthetic and political 'trimness', the noble picturesque allows neither its subjects nor its viewer much scope for vulgar political complaint. The surface picturesque's aestheticisation of the tumbledown bypasses the stoic–victim narrative of the noble picturesque. Consumers of kitsch know exactly what they are doing.

The surface picturesque allows the viewer to try out feelings in excess of what is repressed in everyday life. It is a place where we can safely experience a surplus of emotion that *does* allow for complex sympathies by virtue of the fact they are not large and not fixed. These feelings, which Ruskin terms *vague*, could be redefined as sticky, in that an undefined number of positions and thoughts can attach to them.

As a species of the surface picturesque, it would be a mistake to see the cursed image *only* as 'what it looks like'. As the New Aesthetic claims to be, it is a network. The amateur online accounts that distribute cursed images facilitate a communal performance of the same sorts of staged reactions as those provoked by the surface picturesque, as cursed images are not *very* disturbing and not *very* scary. What they are is uncanny.

What the cursed image has in common with the New Aesthetic is the point at which the gaze of technology becomes apparent: the pixelated early drone-shot in the first, the spectrally overexposed and flash-eyed family gathering in the second, both evidence of technological interference with human agency. Cursed images are an amateur, networked study of the ways

pre-internet technology has failed other amateurs, the original human photographers. Reposted online, this technological gaze is reprocessed by the human eye of the end-viewer. Cursed images are a slow process of noticing what the photograph seems to hide and seems to reveal. A cursed image is disturbing because, like the New Aesthetic, it is difficult to read. It requires interpretation. This process defines its aesthetic.

Contemporary laptops or phones bring the horror of these old-tech homes into yours. Like Hito Steyerl's poor image, cursed images have become internet currency and – much like Sianne Ngai's analysis of the 2014 horror film *It Follows* as a metaphor for transferrable debt – they transmit a curse when they are passed on. What is the nature of this contagion? The curse is a reminder that we are not technology. It is also a reminder of the domestic, of our reliance on *your mom*, of our imperfectly met, embarrassing or gross bodily needs, but also of our imperfect attempts at technology-enabled aesthetic practice.

In the cursed image, *your mom* is everywhere. She dresses her family up in shoddily homemade fancy dress as big-budget cartoon characters: the Simpsons or Shrek. She makes terrifying, vivid guacamole, served from the body of a sugar-pink (pink features heavily, as does lurid green) girlchild doll. But *your mom* isn't the only one implicated in this *unheimlich* manoeuvre. If *your mom* provided the content, who is holding the camera? Your da, your aunty or maybe someone else's mom. And who posted these pictures? Who ripped them from the family album, or who entrusted their album to Picasa, Flickr or any of those semi-defunct photo-album apps, created in the days when putting your image online didn't automatically make you think about revenge porn or identity theft? Who are the original keepers of these memories?

'Actual human computers really remember what they have got to do,' wrote Alan Turing in *Computing, Machinery and Intelligence*.[19] In those days, a human computer was the person inputting data to the memory: often – due to the keyboard's association with secretarial work – a woman. So, many

women tend the family album, first on the page and then the screen, and a refusal of this gendered labour masquerading as leisure is one of the reasons I don't take photos. Perhaps this is a kind of superstition, or perhaps it is a refusal of screen memory.

A screen memory, according to Freud, screens something unmemorable

– by which I mean something I don't want to remember –

with something unmemorable

– by which I mean something I don't know why I remember.

'A recollection', writes Freud, 'whose value lies in the fact that it represents in the memory impressions and thoughts of a later date whose content is connected with its own by symbolic or similar links, may appropriately be called a "screen memory".'[20] A screen memory screens the values it conceals, which are deferred or dispersed across the emotional economy. As in programming, there is a heap of free memory just waiting for the allocation of values. Any value must be located in the memory in order to be recalled.

A snapshot is allocated a value according to its location in the family album. My parents cannot stop taking snaps that always look the same: one or both of them standing, with the same expression, in front of different things – church/tree/artwork. Casualties of memory's transfer from analog to digital, they keep them all. Onscreen, they take so little space.

As computer memory is finite, any location in the memory can be re-used. To free up memory for new values, it is necessary to forget. To forget, it is necessary to locate the value, just as the value that is screened by Freud's screen memory must be located in order to be processed. In a memory-leak situation, where a value's location has been forgotten, memory can never be freed. A memory leak may lead to system failure through the exhaustion of all memory available.

How are the values of Freud's screen memories measured? In units of the quality that motivates their creation and attends their exhibition: delight. 'It seems, moreover,' writes Freud, that, even when the memory is unpleasant, it is 'as though the recollection of the remote past is in itself facilitated by some pleasurable motive: *forsan et haec olim meminisse juvabit*'.[21] Freud is quoting Virgil: 'Some day, perhaps, it will be a joy to remember even these things.' Even? The memories screened by a screen memory are never pleasant. A screen memory holds a difficult value in reserve.

Do snapshots work like screen memories? Storing their memories in snapshots, are my parents pointing to something they want screened? As phones allow them to take more photos, does this mean more things are screened, or need to be? Does this proliferation reinforce their values, or are they lost? Will they (the snapshots, my parents, their memories – I?) cease to function due to memory overload?

As with humans, computer memory is a word for both the data stored (the memory itself) and the hardware's capacity to remember. In a 2012 edition of the *London Review of Books*, the British writer Jenny Diski identified a possible screen memory, the recollection of appearing in a childhood photograph:

> Here's the thing, though: I can see the entire picture. I can, you may have noticed, see myself. My observation point is from the top of the wall opposite where we are sitting, just below the ceiling, looking down across the room towards me and my father in the chair. I can see me clearly, but what I can't do is position myself on my father's knee and become a part of the picture, even though I am in it. I can't in other words look out at the room from my place on the chair. How can that be a memory? And if it isn't, what is it? When I think about my childhood, that is invariably one of the first 'memories' to spring up, ready and waiting: an untraumatic, slightly-moving picture. It never crossed my mind to notice the anomalous point of view until I was middle-aged.[22]

What Diski is probably *not* having is a screen memory. With hindsight, she can identify no traumatic event it might screen. But it could be what I'd like to call a *screen memoir*: a snapshot that generates, rather than is caused by, the 'impressions and thoughts of a later date'.

Borrowed from a repertoire of set scenes and poses, screen memoirs are necessarily as banal as Freud's screen memories. I am interested not so much in the memory that is screened by their apparently bubblegum affects, but in this screening process. Sometimes what I remember is neither the photograph nor the memory, but the memory of taking the photograph: of preparing to take the photograph; of selecting, of framing, of committing to creating a memory as a piece of amateur art.

In her book *The Years*, the French writer Annie Ernaux orders her experimental autobiography in the third person via a lifetime of snapshots of herself, always taken by someone else. Having 'lived in a scarcity of everything, of objects, images, diversions, explanations of self and the world,' she found that 'other people's memories gave us a place in the world'.[23] Screen memoirs tend to be communal, even if no one looks at them but their maker, and the communities they shore up are global, the 'place in the world' granted by display, which is entirely virtual, however local their setting.

Analepsis is a flashback that interrupts a chronological narrative, like Ernaux's ordering of her snapshots. In his 1972 *Discours du Récit*, the structuralist critic Gérard Genette named this as one type of 'anachrony', an anarchy of chronology, a rejection of a value always being called from at a particular address. Anachrony shows the organising hand of a subject: *I sort, therefore I am*.

'Organising a family album', wrote the Croatian author Dubravka Ugrešić in *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender*, 'is a deeply amateur activity (amateur because it is not devoid of artistic pretentions).'[24] A memory, analeptically detached, Ugrešić writes, 'is a material autobiography, autobiography is a verbal album'.[25]

Freud writes: ‘Whenever in a memory the subject himself appears in this way as an object among other objects,’ as Diski does in her photo memory, ‘this contrast between the acting and the recollecting ego may be taken as evidence that the original impression has been worked over.’[26] In both screen memory and screen memoir the subject is their own subject, but who is ‘working over’ whom?

The professional, mostly journalistic photos that Susan Sontag examined in *On Photography* were taken by subjects who were not related to their subjects. Unlike cursed images, they provoke what she called a ‘chronic voyeuristic relation’: they act to screen (as in *project*) their subject, yet also to screen (as in *filter*) the viewer from the emotional engagement of the family album. The photos Sontag studies generate ‘both a pseudo-presence and a token of absence’[27] but the digital screen creates ‘screen-presence’.[28] Unlike the professional journalistic photo, which creates the illusion that the photographer isn’t there, the posed screen memoir does the opposite via its obviously amateur borrowing from professional formal photography – the works outing, the graduation photo, the wedding – forms that also highlight the subjects’ knowledge that they are being photographed. Sontag characterises journalistic photographs’ ‘balance between being “present” and “absent” ’ as ‘facile’; by contrast the digital screen memoir’s triviality is very serious.[29]

Screen *memoirs* do not always screen a traumatic memory: their proliferation creates more locations for memory and, at their most hopeful, they hold open spaces for a more variable range of values. ‘If an authentic language of culture does appear,’ wrote Ugrešić after the Yugoslav war of the 1990s, ‘one source will be nostalgia.’[30] Nostalgia is dangerous because it encourages remembering. It traps human feeling not only in cute manufactured objects (kitsch), but in amateur art. By virtue of its ‘facile’ status, this art presents a thinner transcriptive link not only between itself and its subject, but between the locally shared emotions mediated by the amateur artist of the family album, whether that album is Morocco-bound

or passed around on Facebook. This is why Ugrešić is so interested in photography: ‘A photograph’, she writes, ‘is also a memory.’[31]

Family albums are superior to ‘professional’ art, writes Ugrešić, because of ‘the blind chance that they will hit upon the point of pain’.[32] A screen memoir is not art *on the subject of*, but art *by* its subject, for an audience who know the subjects, or the situation, personally. It creates a tension that draws attention to a space in which a subject might appear, lifting, as Ugrešić writes, the practice of making a family album to ‘another non-aesthetic level’.[33]

But cursed images are not family albums – not the families of those who post them online, anyway. Flipping through the albums of people who aren’t family can be a way of outsourcing nostalgia (the stranger’s wedding photos picked up at the yard sale), or its inverse, something we have no word for. The posters of cursed images may not own the photos but they are owned by them – in the internet sense of being owned: of having an undeniably personal experience demonstrated to you in no uncertain terms. ‘They’re images of memories that never actually happened to you, but the moment you see them, it’s suddenly happening to you,’ said the nineteen-year-old photography and film student who started the original cursed-image Tumblr in 2015, in an anonymous *Paper* magazine interview in 2019.[34] The founder of the site is anonymous by choice. Cursed images’ anonymity is different. Anonymity is chosen not by their creators, but their curators. Art may be a form of attention, but paying attention to other people’s lives by cherrypicking their aesthetic creations lifts the act to ‘another non-aesthetic level’ whose ethics are questionable. The erasure of the photos’ named creators only makes them seem real in ways intentional creations are not. To reveal their source would not only ruin this effect but raise the question already hovering in the background: whose mom is this? What’s never asked is: How would *she* feel about all this? Because, excluded by technology, the assumption is, she’ll never see it.

One function of cursed images is the rejection of what they show. Besides *your mom*, they feature other anonymous beings recognisable as

mostly harmless: babies, animals, kids and non-alpha males – beings as removed from the shiny image of digital technology as possible. What is being rejected – and celebrated – alongside certain ways of life, is certain ways of using, and failing at, technology.

Pics or it didn't happen? If images are always in doubt, it's because we still look to them for authenticity. Cursed images are not only nostalgia for old-skool technologies that can fail but for tech that couldn't easily be manipulated by amateurs. Now anyone can use Deep Nostalgia AI to deepfake their ancestors, making them all into 'laughing Victorians'; but we still want to think there was a time when the camera never lied. And though, very occasionally, cursed images are altered, they mostly rely on a presumption that failure guarantees authenticity. But we're running out of cursed images now that we have cameras that don't allow for the same mistakes.

How do we cope with the idea that the internet is history; that its media are no longer new; that a platform whose essence was its novelty is no longer novel; that it is no longer separate from everything else? As we have coped with the end of every other medium, by taking what is obsolete in its technology and making it into art.

Technology becomes a ruin when it is superseded, and a ruin is, as Ruskin notes, subject to becoming picturesque. Art tends to recuperate the obsolete: risograph and photocopy art in the age of scanning; a craze for Super 8 in the age of video, and for video in the age of HD. But can we have nostalgia for technology that was never produced?

Vapor*ware* is a term for software or hardware that is announced but never released to the public, the hauntological promise of technology that never arrived. In 1983, hoping to generate start-up funds, Ovation Technologies publicised an office software suite that did not yet exist, touring industry shows and holding a news conference in a fancy New York restaurant. The company raised several million dollars from backers who believed the product was ready to launch, before filing for bankruptcy in 1984. Since

then, companies including IBM and Apple have been accused of strategically announcing imaginary products to scare off competitors or test the market for popularity, only going into production if it responds.

Vapor*wave* is a related musical and visual genre that riffs on this promise as aesthetic. It is the promise not of an actual technology but of the feeling of technology that never arrived. Not ‘what it looks like’, but how it might have looked. If hauntology longs for a missing future, then vaporwave is the aesthetic expression of a longing for that longing. It is nostalgia, not for the future but for a vision of the future from the past.

Vaporwave’s composite aesthetic practice marries music with visuals, sampling and riffing on US interpretations of Japanese commercial art of the 1980s. Vaporwave is so concerned with, as James Bridle said, ‘what it looks like’ that its aesthetic is spelled out aesthatically, as ‘a e s t h e t i c’ or ‘A E S T H E T I C’. Its images were largely created to furnish visual material for vaporwave music, an electronic genre that works over earlier generations of kitsch (elevator music, lobby jazz) – usually with an element of pastiche signalled via exaggeration or glitch: the music is slowed and looped.

Vaporwave depends on time lag and distance. This is significant in the New Aesthetic and cursed images too. Bridle’s ‘sight at a distance, action at a distance’, brings ethics into aesthetics via the idea that *sight* is used to train the sights of a gun. Cursed images simultaneously claim and distance themselves from family values, but vaporwave seems located nowhere and produced by no one. As Adam Harper writes in one of the few critical assessments of the genre in the old medium of print, vaporwave seems to suggest that it ‘was produced by some corporation as mood music for a lifestyle of business, shopping or luxurious downtime’.[35]

‘Homesick for a Place I’m Not Even Sure Exists’ is a vaporware image macro (meme) from 2017, frequently nostalgia-posted in the early 2020s.

If cursed images are about an overload of the human – the flashed-out eyes evidence of a photo having been taken by *someone* – then vaporwave images are smoothly fictional: that airbrushed coffee cup never belonged to anyone. Vaporwave is more object-oriented than cursed images: the humans who never owned these objects have already left.

Vaporwave both is and is not human work. Working via the online exchange of sampled digital music, which was never played offline, was, in

the early 2010s, something new. An unmonetised, if not strictly amateur, practice, it refers back to no live set. Still, it references more traditional methods of experiencing music. Vaporwave gained ground when YouTube began to allow users to host live streams, including the conceptual skeuomorph of DIY one-host 'radio stations'. Vaporwave is often dissed because its bricolage techniques don't look like work, but, ironically for a genre that foregrounds its technological origins, vaporwave is handmade. It is not the muzak that it parodies and worships: it is created by individual artists. Though anonymity is a vaporwave value, and some of its unseen creators record under multiple aliases, vaporwave's move from the brutality of mass-produced kitsch to the kindness of pastiche remixes technology with the human.[36]

More scrapbook than photo album, its images – which may contain photos of airbrushed cars or buildings, and sometimes anime-style characters, but never photographically IRL people – look professional. It is characterised by an aesthetic that's too slick: a slickness produced by a previous generation that aspired to the finish afforded by the machine. Despite, or rather because of, this slickness, vaporwave can feel clunky. There's an ugliness to vaporwave's smooth manufactured beauty, which it leans into. This clunkiness is the point at which the human shows itself, not in opposition to technology but as digitally native.

Bodiless and digital, vaporwave nevertheless gives humans physical sensations, and they are a e s t h e t i c : 'The original Floral Shoppe sounds like I'm slowly falling asleep while looking out my window to a sunset,' says one commenter on MAC マイナス's 'Updated Floral Experience' (Macintosh Plus even remixed her remix in 2020). Note the Japanese characters, which, signalling vaporwave's obsession with the visual ephemera of the Japanese economic boom of the 1980s and 1990s, double its aesthetic distance – because vaporwave is not a Japanese aesthetic. Designed for a largely English-speaking audience (a popular vaporwave practice is putting English-language quotes into Japanese through google translate on loop), it vibes to a nostalgia for a *kawaii* culture removed in

space as well as time. For vaporwave fans outside the US (as many are), it exists at a further remove, which is not a bug but a feature: if we're not North Americans looking at Japan, this is not our nostalgia.

If vaporwave looks like anything, it's postmodernism. But we're no longer in the postmodern era, so its nostalgia for the postmodern, perhaps nostalgia for the idea of being *post*, for the ability to situate yourself in relation to – even if beyond – time that is linear rather than rhizomatic. This linear time is something the 'New' Aesthetic suggests – or maybe questions – in its name.

Rather than noticing the effects of the technological gaze, as in poor or cursed images, vaporwave asks the question: *How can what is new not be modern – and vice versa*? Vaporwave was (or is) kryptonite to the New Aesthetic, which, Bridle says, originated 'in a frustration at retro-ness (the belief that authenticity can only be located in the past)'. All these aesthetics are haunted by the idea of the authentic, which depends on belief in an original artefact, which in turn depends on a story: proof of the human. Vaporwave's cheerful hauntology is the effect of a nostalgia for nostalgia, utilising mass-produced kitsch to create something removed, both in time, and from the idea of any 'original'.[37]

Vaporwave is the belief that *inauthenticity* can only be located in the past. 'How easy is it to convince well-informed music consumers that a fake thing is a real thing?' asked Johnny Coleman in the online music mag Pitchfork in 2015, where vaporwave is one entry in: 'Which of the following are real genres and which are bullshit*?',[38] the same sort of quiz that asks you if something's a font or a cheese. Vaporwave's indeterminate status seems as essential as the mystery at the heart of the New Aesthetic (Who saw this? How did it see?) or the cursed image (Who took this? What are they doing?). Each genre engages with the idea that the camera never lies.

If vaporwave is not personal, is it hauntological? Its cultural melancholy is not that of the overfamiliar cursed image, or the non-human New Aesthetic. Its synthetic environments were designed for humans, but it is

elevator music without an occupant. There is a melancholy in this non-presence.

There are some crossovers. An uncanny meet-up between vaporwave and cursed images might have happened in the ‘uneasy nostalgia’ of the Backrooms.[39] Originating on 4chan in 2019, its Wiki fandom is a Creative Commons, amateur and collaborative virtual world of user-created visuals and online urban myths (known as creepypasta) based in empty malls and offices, rendered as in a horror movie or first-person shooter game. The flipside of vaporwave, the Backrooms’ visuals stage potential hauntings in the abandoned backwaters of post-lockdown capitalism. Here, anonymity is unsettling, as is the absence of anything human.

It’s not for nothing that sixteen-year-old then-amateur digital filmmaker Kane Pixels’s 2022 horror short, *The Backrooms (Found Footage)*, has anonymity built into its title. Once there’s narrative, there will likely be plot and characters: monsters and heroes – or victims – but Pixels’s inspiration was unpeopled memories filtered through technology: ‘I mostly remember that time through little glimpses of memories here and there and then family photos . . . The flash is always on, the lighting is gross looking, there’s yellow walls, the white balance is all off.’[40] *Your mom*, though not apparent, is always lurking – her abandonment as terrifying as any manifestation. ‘Maybe a parent was working late at the office one night and left us to our own devices in a big, empty building full of winding, maze-like corridors,’ writes Litbeep, founder of the original r/Trubackrooms forum.[41]

What a haunting does is bring the past into connection with the future. So many spectres appear as a warning from the past about what is to come. They also ask us to pause, and, in the process, erase themselves. A haunting is not nostalgic: the horrific repetition of the beloved past (the lover, friend or relative returned, turned to clay) seldom comforts. Creepypastas associated with the Backrooms, are not about the return of the dead but the return of dead technology. It is not the past that leaks into the present, but

old media: rediscovered, long-forgotten video games or episodes of TV shows unleash monsters, or provoke murderous, or suicidal, insanity.

Vaporwave is simultaneously dead and alive. Associated with music deadened by kitsch (elevator music is jazz reified), it has frequently been declared dead. Its Schrodinger's Cat status is important. Its glitchy pastiching breeds lilacs out of the dead ground, and lilac is the prime vaporwave colour. The doom-mongers are often its fans, who proclaim: *Vaporwave is dead, long live x or x*.

This is what makes vaporwave subtly different from Fredric Jameson's 'nostalgia mode', the 'aesthetic colonisation' of the historical past by its fictional tropes reiterated in new fictional depictions, ensuring, Jameson believes, the 'waning of our historicity' – our ability to engage with either the present or the past except on cheaply aesthetic terms. It may be equally disturbing to consider that we now have nostalgia *for* kitsch: communities of memory identify themselves via nostalgia for discontinued nostalgic, mass-produced commercial products, which we can long for with a nostalgic longing.

But it would be wrong to think of nostalgia mode as the internet's prime aesthetic. Jameson cites film and fiction as the vehicles of his mode, but both books and cinema already existed in the eras nostalgia mode depicts. Vaporwave may deal with fictional images of the past, but crucially it remakes them in a new medium – or in 'new media' whose truly interactive nature is guaranteed by free, communal, amateur creation.

Vaporwave works like hauntology inverted: not nostalgia for a future, but for the non-future of a past that didn't happen. And – perhaps surprisingly – this offers hope. Vaporwave is not Franco Berardi's 'slow cancellation of the future' (quoted by Mark Fisher at the beginning of *Ghosts of My Life*). Hauntology has hung around like a depressive ghost for so long that Fisher's performative regret for a future that has been withdrawn has itself become a nostagia that fails to offer any point of departure. What's the alternative, when, as Fisher writes, 'there is no alternative'? Is it easier to

imagine the end of the world than an end to the kind of cultural melancholy that finds the end of the world easier to imagine than the end of capitalism?

Fisher's nostalgia for a time when culture had 'the ability to grasp and articulate the present' is the longing for an era whose vaunted cultural innovation excluded most of us.[42] Nothing much happened to most of the people I knew who were around in those exciting times. Excluded by geographical location, limited finances, class, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, race, they were more often culturally united by the opportunity to consume top-down aesthetic products: the same TV or radio show available on the same day, at the same time for everyone. If internet culture is more niche because it addresses a greater range of perspectives, including inauthentic reworkings of the past created with greater inclusivity in mind, this is not something to be mourned.

If the internet has exacerbated postmodernity's temporo-cultural disruption, our contemporary *new aesthetics* still mess with time, though they don't always look *avant*. In the meantime, what time is not capitalised? In its engagement with this problem, vaporwave repurposes the most capitalised music via its process of slowing.

Vaporwave itself became subject to nostalgia posting in the early 2020s, and this is parallelled in professional arts practice. In May 2023, Martin Herbert, writing in *ArtReview*, noticed that 'revivalism' in professional art had gone off the rails. Instead of conforming to previous conventions of revisiting work of thirty years ago, 'things are coming back that haven't even fully left the present'.[43] He's vague about what these things are, and even 'if it's happening and not a blip'. But if it is, nostalgia for what is current, Herbert writes, 'would unquestionably constitute a *move*, seemingly one of few available right now'.

Nostalgic versions of previous aesthetics always risk 'nostalgia mode', but this engagement with a kitschy 'surface picturesque' has the potential for, as Ugrešić wrote, 'another non-aesthetic level'.[44] While the New Aesthetic participates in old-skool artistic structures of the named artist and the avant-garde, cursed images and vaporwave are not the mass-produced

kitsch they resemble, but its reclamation by amateurs. Their reworking of the industrial as handmade does not elicit the ‘awww’ of Ruskin’s surface picturesque, but a range of complicated responses.

What vaporwave does is to *not quite* reproduce, pastiche or parody. It’s not a nostalgic genre: it uses a contemporary technological lens to look at, and mess with, not only earlier work, but the idea of nostalgia itself. Its appearance of machine-manufactured perfection is a knowing failure. And this failure is its success.

Many of the early entries on Bridle’s Tumblr are broken links, returning the message: ‘The Wayback Machine has not archived that URL.’ Right now, it’s likely we’ll die of nostalgia, of the urge to collect, preserve, memorialise. The ecological cost of the servers will ensure it. To counter this, we might have to put our memories back into objects, for which, we can more readily comprehend, we have limited space. In the meantime, we’ll have to change our aesthetics: we’ll have to choose what we discard, what we preserve. We’ll have to lose something via lossy compression. We’ll have to save less to save ourselves. We’ll have to get used to seeing ourselves again in black and white, pixelated. We’ll have to go back to making poor images. Aesthetics, which are killing us, also have the chance to save us.

2001: The Decuperation Loops

> *We shall not have succeeded in demolishing everything unless we demolish the ruins as well. But the only way I can see of doing that is to use them to put up a lot of fine, well-designed buildings.*
>
> Alfred Jarry, *Ubu Roi*

In 2002 and 2003, the American composer William Basinski released a series of recordings of tape loops on CD. The loops were taken from hundreds of short tapes of his own playing, or recordings from radio stations, or ambient noise that he'd made during the 1980s. Transferring them to digital, he found their quality had deteriorated. Played one last time, they disintegrated, crumbled, split. As Basinski made the final transfer on 11 September 2001, he looked up and noticed a plume of smoke through his window. He climbed up to the roof of his Brooklyn home to video the disintegration happening across the water.

Basinski's work marked a moment of change in global politics and in global technology. It put the world in which the Twin Towers existed into the past, where it survived only on the cover of Macintosh Plus's vaporwave album *Floral Shoppe.* Basinski's tapes caught the last train from analog to digital. As the Twin Towers fell, did he attempt to preserve something of a world that was disintegrating, or to lean into its disintegration? When he played the tapes into a digital recording device, their splintering created something that was neither what were nor what they might become. Although they looped, it was not in the digital sense: each turn of the spindle erased replayability. There would be no repetition, not in that medium.

Basinski is a professional composer, but *The Disintegration Loops* is a work that loops the professional with the amateur. Tapes – audio and video – are amateur media, and mixtapes predated online remix culture. These pre-internet, amateur-empowering devices were blamed for the disintegration of copyright, used by record and film companies as an excuse to pay creators less. I also recorded from radio to tape in the eighties, a kid making mixtapes by putting the two machines as close together as their leads allowed. The result, like Basinski's ambient recordings, was interfered with by whatever the air between them was doing at the time, leaving evidence that my tapes were 'transcribed'.

Transcription is a feature of all aesthetic works, and it involves both space and time: both the leap between the creation of the work and its performance and the gap created by the inscription of that process on some sort of physical recording surface: vinyl, CD, server, hard disk. Transcription is twinned with transmission, which it serves: the original transcription of the work into a score becomes the engine for its transmission as performance; the medium onto which that performance is transcribed and multiply re-transmitted signals a second break between the work and its audience.

What creates these temporo-spatial splits is any form of aesthetic representation. In Basinski's case, this is multilayered: the digital recording transcribed his analog tapes, which in turn transcribed and re-transmitted something that had originally been live. Personal hardware adds another layer: not only the TV showing the classic film, or the radio DJ transmitting music recorded on vinyl through the airwaves, but the mixtape, the bootleg CD, the ripped DVD – recordings not only played, but made, by amateurs. The re-publication of these recordings online adds another transcriptive interface.

Digital interfaces only *appear* to make this layer more obvious than older, more familiar media. The art gallery, cinema or theatre's visible sectioning off of art into non-quotidian time and space has become invisible, part of our culture. Digital platforms' casual transmission – opera

in snatches, tragedy on the bus – still seems so unusual as to call attention to itself in the same way domestic radios once did (an orchestra in your kitchen – imagine!).

Any act of aesthetic separation does a particular thing to cultural continuity. ‘Aesthetics’, wrote the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben in his 1999 essay ‘The Melancholy Angel’, ‘performs the same task that tradition performed before its interruption.’ But it doesn’t do ‘tradition’s work of “knotting up again the broken thread in the plot of the past” ’: like Basinski’s tapes, it erodes it.[1]

What Agamben means by tradition is creative practices performed within their local social context: folk song, saints in niches, handknits – expressions of religion or custom. There is no moment of transcription or transmission; these works exist as part of living culture. It is only when these practices are decontextualised that they become something aesthetic: art. Agamben locates the destructive engine of art in its ‘beauty’, which also offers something else: ‘By destroying the transmissibility of the past, aesthetics recuperates it negatively and makes intransmissibility a value in itself,’ which opens ‘for man a [*sic*] space between past and future in which he can found his action and his knowledge’.[2] The looping time of cultural continuity, once fragmented, becomes a political space.

‘There are two different forms of fragmentation,’ Agamben writes. One is ‘exhaustion and finish’ – degradation, crumbling, the exponential glitch of repeated acts of transcription; the other, ‘event and presentation’, or transmission. The first category seems to point to the temporal; the second to the material: time and space. Fragmentation is a familiar technique in art, particularly post-Romanticism, from fragments of columns to fragments of poetry. If Agamben is right, it creates a glitch in the continuity of cultural memory.

How does this glitch play out online, where it is a different sort of break from modernism’s ruptures? As well as a different break from ‘move fast and break things’, the net-associated motto ascribed to Meta’s Mark Zuckerberg? If we’re to take Agamben’s assessment of the power of

aesthetics seriously, however much it harks back to the existence of a mythical age of unbroken cultural transmission, we must look at what this break means now that so many of our aesthetic objects exist only virtually.

By the 2000s, if ‘tradition’ was less often transmitted via direct cultural participation, it was more likely to be stored in an object that not only altered the nature of cultural transmission but involved that transmission in commerce. These objects could (and usually did) accrue not only cultural but monetary value over time. *The Disintegration Loops* was first encountered by its audience via a traditionally transmissible aesthetic object – known in the art world as a multiple – a CD, released by Basinski in 2002. ‘We sold hundreds of them,’ recalled the owners of Other Music, the New York indie record store that stocked Basinski’s work, in a 2019 documentary. ‘I mean, we could just keep selling them.’[3]

In 2002 there were two methods of transmitting a CD: selling and ripping. ‘Ripping’ means the illegal copying of CDs or DVDs, but it’s also a word for fragmenting. Evading copyright, ripping breaks some of the links between cultural and financial value but it also layers up glitch and crackle: evidence of transcription. But the *Loops* has never existed for me as a saleable object, even a ripped one. I first encountered the piece on YouTube, not only apparently immaterial but free at the point of delivery, its materiality deferred to servers and data centres. So much of the online experience only *appears* to be immaterial. Though I didn’t buy an object – a record, a tape, a CD or even a ticket to the online performance of Basinski’s work – I bought into (or was sold on, or sold to) a platform that dealt me ads between videos, and I also had to possess an object (a phone, a laptop) in order to hear and see it.

If the YouTube iteration of the *Loops* is not an object, is it a kind of ‘happening’? A funny word that, as soon as it was coined, almost immediately became a joke about the aspirations to immediacy of late twentieth-century radical art, or perhaps about the limitations of what art might be able to make happen. Happenings were also an attempt to rip art

from its ties to the collectable, saleable art object, an aspiration which the transcription of these works onto the recording devices of their day partially undermined. ‘ “Happenings” and “performance art” ’, Jean-Luc Nancy wrote in 1993, still feeling the need to use scare quotes, rely on ‘all of that which, within contemporary art, has revolved around the motif of the event (for example, Polaroid and video, the residual, the accidental, the aleatory, staining, interruption, and so on’.[4]

The happening was an attempt to keep art in the present tense. The word hovers between noun and verb so that it both is and isn’t *a* happening. Happening is a vague term, its non-specific nature a prompt to search for what it suggests. Online, it most often forms a question. Under Elon Musk, the slightly clunky ‘What is happening?’ – rather than the intuitive ‘What’s happening’ – is the prompt in every tweet box. ‘What’s happening’ is an open-ended phrase that nevertheless suggests that something *is* always happening – or perhaps checks for it anxiously (FOMO).

Though it has been orchestrated and performed ‘live’ in an act of reverse-transcription, Basinski’s piece was not initially a live performance. As a CD, the ‘residue’ *was* the event, but its online iteration ‘happens’ as a process of looping transmission. The *Loops*, as I encountered them, happened and continue to happen within the internet’s social context. Check the comments thread below the clip, which is an integral part of the work’s online existence, making this iteration of the *Loops* less a transmission of a transcription than a kind of live performance. The YouTube video of *The Disintegration Loops* does not crumble with replaying like older physical media but builds via its online context, beyond the control of any single agency, from the creator to the publisher, to the listener.

If Basinski’s tape, as Sasha Frere-Jones wrote in the *New Yorker*, in the process of being digitally transcribed, ‘edits itself’, YouTube goes one further.[5] The work can be – and has been – re-edited, cut, set to different visuals. Its end users can speed it up, slow it down, playlist it, adding it to the online equivalent of an album or a concert programme alongside other

works. But to make this kind of mixtape now is not the same as to make one in 1993 when Nancy was writing, by which time the power of amateurs to store art in objects – in tapes, on floppy disks, on VHS – was a given. It's not even the same as making a tape in 2001 when those technologies were on their way out, replaced by rippable CDs and DVDs, themselves soon to be overwritten by the virtual mixtapes of YouTube playlists (introduced in 2008) and Spotify mixes (2006).

Tape recorders like Basinski's have gone from being functional to historical fetish media. Which means, no doubt, there will be more of them, just as every hipster café and barbershop owns a newly produced retro-styled record player. No longer the go-to for its original function, outdated technology becomes aesthetic. Fetishised obsolete media technologies not only continue to transmit art but twin art with a notion of something past. They bring an awareness of time to the fore particularly when the hardware is either more newfangled or outdated than the art it transmits. This is most apparent when something in the process can be seen to fail: when a 1998 CD of a vinyl recording of Martha Argerich's 1965 performance of Chopin's 1844 Sonata No. 3 glitches.

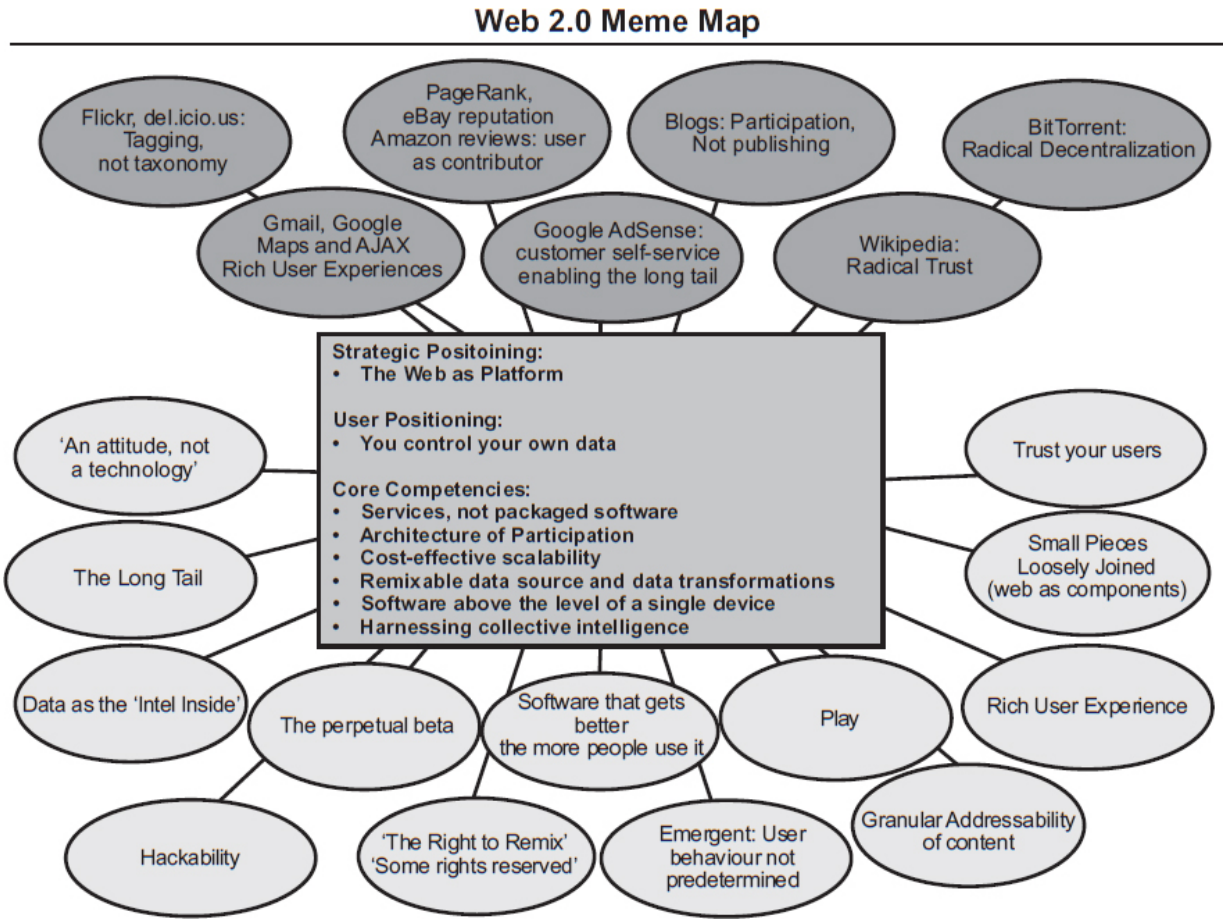
Basinski's *Loops* may be fascinated by the supersession of analog by digital media, but artists have been working with technological gaps long before the net's existence. The twentieth century brought a glut of media technologies for artists to play with, and their degradation has been more unpredictable than traditional art materials: stone, canvas, paint. Artists have worked both with what is degraded, and with this process of degradation. They have particularly turned – like Basinski – to technology at the moment it becomes obsolete.

Transcription's process of reification has long been a problem for art – see Keats's 'Ode on a Grecian Urn', which, like Basinski's work, uses one medium (writing) to record another (ceramics). An aesthetic object always includes melancholy. When artists use obsolete media, they play with the idea that art itself has a sell-by date, highlighting art's tendency to create breaks in cultural continuity. If we're going to follow Agamben's argument,

this also reveals its ability to create spaces for something else. But works that exist online don't degrade with each replaying in the same way as film stock or tape. They have two states: they are there, or not.

In *The Disintegration Loops*, the slow degradation of Basinski's original material is twinned with the digital on/off presence of the work itself. This has been a revolutionary enough process to mess with pre-internet forms of capitalism. Not only are virtual objects difficult to sell, collect and value, but their existence across time is less predictable. In meatspace: 'The limit of the circulation time of a commodity-capital imposed by the spoiling of the body of the commodity is the absolute limit of this part of the time of circulation,' Marx wrote in *Capital*.[6] But, online, circulation does not 'spoil' an eternally replayable aesthetic object, which is seemingly available for limitless exploitation; in fact, it exists by virtue of its continued circulation. And online, aesthetic works, almost as liquid as capital, rely on the same platforms as capital for their existence and exchange.

The recording surface that crumbles and loops in the YouTube iteration of Basinski's work is not just that of the tapes but an entire society. The net acts as what Deleuze and Guattari, in *Anti-Oedipus*, call the 'socius . . . a full body [that] forms a surface where all production is recorded, whereupon the entire process appears to emanate from this recording surface'.[7] The *Loops*, besides 'editing itself,' continues to produce itself online as a locus for both social and financial production, marking the work as a continuous live transmission, but also as a commodity for platform profit. It is a 'surface' where 'production is immediately consumption and a recording process without any sort of mediation . . . Hence everything is production.'[8]


Web 2.0 Meme Map
Flickr, del.icio.us: Tagging, not taxonomy
PageRank, eBay reputation Amazon reviews: user as contributor
Blogs: Participation, Not publishing
BitTorrent: Radical Decentralization
Gmail, Google Maps and AJAX Rich User Experiences
Google AdSense: customer self-service enabling the long tail
Wikipedia: Radical Trust
Strategic Positoining:
• The Web as Platform
User Positioning:
• You control your own data
Core Competencies:
• Services, not packaged software
• Architecture of Participation
• Cost-effective scalability
• Remixable data source and data transformations
• Software above the level of a single device
• Harnessing collective intelligence
'An attitude, not a technology'
Trust your users
The Long Tail
Small Pieces Loosely Joined (web as components)
Data as the 'Intel Inside'
The perpetual beta
Software that gets better the more people use it
Play
Rich User Experience
Hackability
'The Right to Remix' 'Some rights reserved'
Emergent: User behaviour not predetermined
Granular Addressability of content

Web 2.0 Meme Map (from Tim O'Reilly, 'What Is Web 2.0', oreilly.com).

D&G's metaphors were enthusiastically taken up by the developers of Web 2.0, looking for ways to conceptualise the virtual as a space. *Vector*, *flow*, *rhizome* and *deterritorialisation*: these descriptions, adopted by both net liberals and libertarians, users and profiteers, describe spaces that are defined by movement across time: acceleration, direction, speed.

In 2005, net entrepreneur Tim O'Reilly wrote a blogpost, 'What is Web 2.0', its oddly blank title with no question mark suggesting there was never any question. He proposed a model, what he called a 'meme map' of relational structures with a 'gravitational core': 'You can visualize Web 2.0 as a set of principles and practices that tie together a veritable solar system

of sites that demonstrate some or all of those principles, at a varying distance from that core.'[9] Though this seems to reference Deleuze and Guattari's rhizomatic structures, O'Reilly's accompanying graphic, which very much links amateur use to corporate profit, in no way indicates the sophisticated interconnectivity his words conjure: it's a meatspace list-maker's linear idea of horizontality.

What kind of space (or time) is the net? And why does it matter how it is described? For-profit Web 2.0 had a stake in temporally linear spaces. Platforms organised user space into 'timelines' of square or rectangular frames that we now take for granted on commercial social media sites, driven by amateur creative content. Posts on blogs, Tumblr and Instagram, tweets, the cinema screen of YouTube are all reminders of the art gallery, the cinema, the photo album: skeuomorphic cultural frameworks that tell us that we are having an art experience. Like Agamben's break separating art from tradition, they section off whatever they frame as having aesthetic intent. These frames are not only spatial but temporal, depending on the time they take to cross (view, scroll). These spatial metaphors mark the spot not only of aesthetic but financial fences.

But by containing aesthetic works in order to exploit them, platforms have also created venues for amateur gestures of breaking. An 'exploitable environment' is a net-coined term for an on- or offline interactive space that can be altered by users. It is a 'hackable environment', subject to what, online, has been called a combo breaker.

C-C-C-C-Combo breaker! is the only thing stronger than a Combo. A term borrowed from the 1994 game *Killer Instinct*, a Combo is a mashup of fight moves deployed by one player on another, that is inescapable unless the second player discovers and deploys an unexpected series of countermoves: a Combo Breaker. But on Web 2.0-era forums and social media, a Combo is a string of images or phrases posted by different users across the frames of the platform to form a pattern. The Combo Breaker shatters the sequence, drawing attention to the presence of the frame.

>> Anonymous 12/15/06(Fri)08:57:04 No.17332979
File :1166191024113.jpg-(16 KB, 266x267, menu_side_salad.jpg)

What to eat for lunch?
Bend over bitch, I'll show you
Lightly tossed salad

>> Anonymous 12/15/06(Fri)08:57:28 No.17332991

Borg told me once
All your base are belong to us
And I got scared

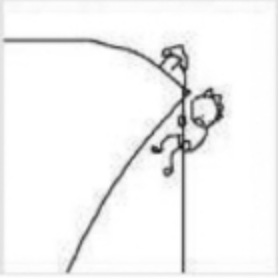
... this needs some bel air.

>> Anonymous 12/15/06(Fri)08:57:35 No.17332997

You know what, /b/tards?
C-C-C-COMBO BREAKER
Instead of a dumb haiku
I wrote a tanka
Suck my balls now, please

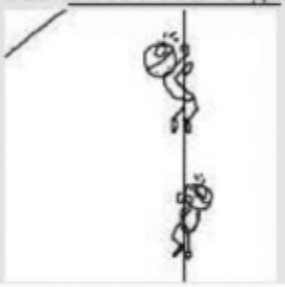
The first archived 4chan thread featuring a Combo Breaker, 15 December 2006 (from knowyourmeme.com).

>> ☐ 11/18/06(Sat)22:00:59 No.15926233
File :1163905259.gif-(1 KB, 250x250, cave1.gif)



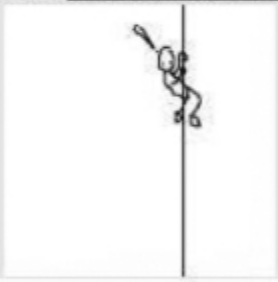
How you doin' down there guys?

>> ☐ 11/18/06(Sat)22:01:15 No.15926245
File :1163905275.gif-(1 KB, 250x250, cave2.gif)



We're good! How about down there?

>> ☐ 11/18/06(Sat)22:01:28 No.15926254
File :1163905288.gif-(1 KB, 250x250, cave3.gif)



I think Bob's in trouble!

>> ☐ 11/18/06(Sat)22:01:58 No.15926270

breaker

>> ☐ 11/18/06(Sat)22:02:14 No.15926281
File :1163905334.gif-(1 KB, 250x250, cave4.gif)

OH FUCK ALL YOU GUYS

Combo or Combo breaker? 18 November 2006 (from knowyourmeme.com).

Platforms are messing with frame-breaking now, only the joke no longer visibly plays out across the screen; it's on the user. Instagram and Twitter disrupt their own linear timelines with hidden algorithms that give you what they want to give you under the sign of your 'preferences'. TikTok deals you random posts that show you something you're not looking for. This only looks like a risky commercial strategy, making sites more, not less, difficult to navigate. If space online takes the form of the timeline, and if time is money, platforms use Combo Breakers to make you spend more time in their space.

The earliest temporally horizontal platforms were amateur-run, and sometimes illegal: archive.org; IMDB; libgen; or whatever might have replaced them by the time these words are made public via the legacy medium of print. But now commercial platforms create spaces in which cultural time is maintained in a state of overflow: Spotify playlists encourage mixing Charlie Parker with Charli XCX; Instagram patchworks Botticelli with Banksy.

Is this a form of capitalism or, as McKenzie Wark puts it, 'something worse': a new 'vectorialist' class of platform owners, in control not of flows of capital but vectors of data. Vectors, as Wark writes, are metaphors: they 'describe in the abstract the infrastructure on which information is routed, whether through time or space'; they are 'a way of thinking about a technology as having something about it that shapes the world in a particular way'. A definition of space can be an invitation to claim ownership of it but, though 'you can own stocks or flows of information', Wark writes, it's 'far better to own the vector'.[10]

'The contemporary media revolution', Julia Kristeva wrote presciently in 1981,

> which is manifest in the storage and reproduction of information, implies an idea of time as frozen or exploding according to the vagaries of demand, returning to its source but uncontrollable, utterly bypassing its subject and leaving only two preoccupations to those who approve of it: Who is to have power over the origin (the programming) and the end (the use)?[11]

What happens when the vector works with flows not of information but aesthetics? Vectoral aesthetic capitalism does not depend on the ownership of creative works online, or even their origin or end use. Everything from the production to consumption of online works is outsourced to users, but they have little or no control over the programming, storage, access or continued presence of what they create on commercial platforms. Though Instagram, for example, does not own the images it frames, its current terms and conditions include a 'non-exclusive, royalty-free, transferable, sub-licensable, worldwide license to host, use, distribute, modify, run, copy, publicly perform or display, translate, and create derivative works of your content', weakening not only the financial but personal ties of creators to their own work.

But what platforms cannot control is their need for the presence of the user – both as maker and consumer. As users are amateur and voluntary, though they can be tempted, flattered, deceived and shamed into participation, they cannot be forced to produce, transmit and consume work. Most aesthetic platforms – relying, for our unpaid contributions, on the illusion they foster that our presence there is a leisure activity – find it difficult to make users pay at the point of use. Platforms require continuous transmission for their existence – on 'time as frozen or exploding,' depending on person-hours spent watching, scrolling and clicking. Transmission creates online space by taking time. If modernism's watchword was speed, and postmodernism's flattened time signalled the end of history, our temporal mode is looping duration.

‘We don’t ask how big a show is anymore, but how *long*,’ wrote the art critic Claire Bishop in 2012, commenting on work produced in response to the overwhelm of material online: ‘A tiny gallery can contain *days* of art.’[12] In the digital age, it is normal to use, not urinals or Brillo boxes, but time as a medium, a recording surface. Is this surface fast or slow? Do its vectors speed us up or slow us down? Is ‘the style of too-late capitalism’, as Anna Kornbluh wrote, ‘immediacy’, or is it better expressed as Nicholas Carr’s diffused and deferred ‘time spent scrolling’ that ‘crowds out the time we spend reading books, as the time we spend exchanging bite-sized text messages crowds out the time we spend composing sentences and paragraphs, as the time we spend hopping across links crowds out,’ a somewhat fanciful utopia of ‘quiet reflection and contemplation’.[13] This slippage into utopian/dystopian language is typical of attempts to describe internet spacetime.

It’s impossible to talk about time and digital technology right now without mentioning accelerationism. Derived from Marx, accelerationism advises speeding up capitalism to smash through dystopia to a post-capitalist utopia – or sometimes, just to smash. ‘Accelerationism’ was coined – critically – by the critical theorist, Benjamin Noys. It has left-wing iterations but is best known for alt-right fantasies of a technological singularity drawn from the writings of Nick Land, who accelerated Noys’s term into a movement.

Noys’s response to Land was not to go faster, but to stop. ‘Marx says that revolutions are the locomotive of world history’ (Noys cites Walter Benjamin). ‘But perhaps it is quite otherwise. Perhaps revolutions are an attempt by the passengers on this train – namely, the human race – to pull the emergency brake.’[14] Benjamin’s passenger is given no choice but to fight technology with its own provisions, implying that capitalism and revolution must be two parts of the same vector. Is Benjamin’s a deliberate understanding that only the master’s tools can dismantle the master’s house; or would this, as Land writes, create ‘a negative feedback circuit – such as a

steam-engine “governor” or a thermostat’ that ‘functions to keep some state of a system in the same place’?[15]

The agreement of all these writers to use metaphors of speed and acceleration for both capitalism and its alternatives creates the binary choice of the trolley problem. Pull the emergency brake or not, someone’s going to get hurt. In ‘#Accelerate Manifesto for an Accelerationist Politics’, left accelerationists Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams point out that the problem is one of aesthetics: a ‘paralysis of the political imaginary’. Srnicek and Williams’s imaginary is not only temporal but, in some sense, spatial. They call for ‘acceleration which is also navigational, an experimental process of discovery within a universal space of possibility’, but they deplore the traditional ‘horizontal’ processes of the grassroots left and call for action ‘at scale’, despite recent evidence that the development of informal online micro-networks are one of the far right’s most effective strategies.

These networks are created not via technological acceleration but by word of mouth. Land’s interest in Albert Hirschman’s distinction between *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty* (1970), which posits quiet quitting as the ultimate right of citizens to ‘exit’ democracy and form alternative structures, opposes voice to the body. If voice is adaptable to the virtual, physical exit is very analog. Its logical conclusion is today’s ‘seasteading’: offshore ‘micronations’ with their own laws. Despite the many defenders of the body as the ground zero of protest, physical political presence can depend on the rights and privileges of meatspace for access. Online, voice can ‘take place’ where bodies cannot.

As an alternative, could we describe the virtual dimensions of the net not in metres or seconds but in units of audibility? Voice is the raison d’être of social media: the interchange of voices is what allows platforms to exist as online spaces, and platforms rely on a surplus of voice for profit. But these platforms have no democratic structure: they are businesses, not parliaments. Platforms are constituted from voices whose aesthetic

messiness is their selling power. But there's something glitchy about this excess that opposes complete recuperation.

Jacques Rancière notes that, when voice takes the time to take up space, a place is established for political representation: 'Politics occurs when those who "have no" time take the time necessary to front up as inhabitants of a common space and demonstrate that their mouths really do emit speech capable of making pronouncements on the common which cannot be reduced to voices signalling pain.' Such voices create spaces that function 'to make heard as speakers those who had been perceived as mere noisy animals'.[16]

A voice transmitted at too high or low a frequency – too fast or slow – becomes noise. Dick Hebdige digs into noise in his 1979 book *Subculture*, in which punk music, read as ' "noise" (as opposed to sound),' creates an 'interference in the orderly sequence which leads from real events and phenomena to their representation in the media'. If, for Rancière, the moment that noise becomes speech marks its entry into politics, Hebdige welcomes noise as a Combo Breaker, 'not only as a metaphor for potential anarchy "out there" but as an actual mechanism of semantic disorder: a kind of temporary blockage in the system of representation'.[17] Hebdige's use of the word, like Rancière's, suggests a link between the meanings of 'representation' as aesthetic practice and as political presence. His punk musicians, by disordering one area, create disorder in the other.

While Noys was right to call accelerationism an aesthetic move, there is a blockage in the representation of the utopia it promises, which remains beyond an eternal event-horizon. It doesn't describe the shiny posthuman future it claims to desire, but fetishises the destruction it tells us it takes to get there. Capitalism ends when it meets the body, which it liquidates in the name of liquidity. Bewitched by its own process, Land's accelerationism can give voice to no aesthetic beyond noises 'signalling pain'. If it speaks of anything, it's the present; or rather, it absolutely nails the era of its origin, with a powerful post-Thatcherite dystopian grunge aesthetic, as expressed in the hyper-cities of 'Judge Dredd', the long-running *2000AD* strip

concurrent with Land's involvement with the Cybernetic Culture Research Unit (CCRU) at the University of Warwick in the 1990s.

A crisis in representation may be better addressed by art than analysis, by critical performance than critical description.

The *Loops* is not an emergency brake. Its action is neither to brake nor to break. It does not accelerate. It slows by crumbling. It looks neither forward nor back in time. It loops.

There is no death in Basinski's video of the Twin Towers that accompanies the work on YouTube. There is no violence or pain, however much we know it's there, and there are no visible bodies. The work is not about individuals (the *New Yorker* described Basinski's work as being 'about buildings'). Nor does Basinski's work address aspects of the political situation that surrounded 9/11. It may as well have been about a natural disaster. The composer did not use any of the visual material that made 9/11 such a multiply historicised event: the eyewitness interviews, the grainy amateur footage of the planes. There's something worrying about the work's anonymous beauty, that echoes Agamben's thought that the sort of representation that renders its subject beautiful is a kind of violence. What Basinski makes beautiful is destruction. It's OK to do this with tapes crumbling, but it's more questionable when dealing with recent, violent death.

According to music critic David Stubbs, it was the day after the event that Basinski added 'Disintegration Loop 1.1' as a soundtrack to the video he took from his rooftop, using digital technology to forever twin the destruction of capital in human and architectural form with the decay of a technology. And it was only several weeks later, Stubbs claims, that Basinski dedicated the work to the victims of 9/11 in a postscript in the CD liner notes.[18] 'It saved my life,' Basinski said, without irony, in an interview.[19] The work, in a creative and financial bleak spot, was his first commercial success.

Stills from Basinki's accompanying video became artwork for the 2002 CDs of the *Loops*, but it was only on YouTube that the music was set to his film. What is the experience of viewing Basinski's application of an experiment in obsolete and new technology applied to a horrific IRL event once it enters a commercial space? Is this like the picnics rich folk used to have near nineteenth-century battlegrounds: tuning in and out of the action, not as though they were at the theatre or cinema, seats always turned towards the stage or screen, but more like contemporary internet users doomscrolling over lunch?

There's a difference. 'Music is fiction, whereas noise is real,' wrote Joseph P. Fisher and Brian Flota in *The Politics* of *Post-9/11 Music*.[20] Like Hebdige, they are talking about noise's ability to block – and music's facilitation of – representation. The online iteration of the *Loops* is a space where audiences who may not have lived within the right offline networks to encounter experimental works can hear as music what they may otherwise have heard as noise. This happens because, not in spite, of the fact that YouTube is a commercial platform where Basinski's work appears horizontally alongside a variety of other musical genres that contextualise Basinski's work not as documentary but art.

Though he uses documentary material, it is Basinski's conversion of noise into music that makes *The Disintegration Loops* art. Basinski's deliberate use of glitchy recording surfaces further highlights the artificiality of his choices. This fictionalisation does something particular to time. 'Is it possible that "fiction" ', Fredric Jameson asks, 'can be defined essentially as the construction of just such fictive and foreshortened temporalities (whether of film or reading), which are then substituted for a real time we are thereby enabled momentarily to forget?'[21] The slowed violence in *The Disintegration Loops* speeds up the historicisation of 9/11 and, in doing so, produces a space that seems the opposite of political.

Does art always crumble event into nostalgia, along with Basinski's fragmenting tapes? Or is it possible, as Agamben wrote of the Holocaust, to speak of atrocities precisely *because* they are unspeakable (a prediction that

a recent slew of ‘Holokitsch’ novels has sadly proved true)? Agamben could have been talking about Basinski’s project when he wrote: ‘The reproduction of the dissolution of transmissibility in the experience of shock becomes, then, the last possible source of meaning and value for things themselves, and art becomes the last tie connecting man to his past.’[22]

Though Basinski was not in Manhattan on 9/11, he was close enough to feel the shock, and his conversion of horror into aesthetics may do something more complicated than allowing us to immediately memorialise and forget. What Basinski’s work does is to simultaneously shock and un-shock, which is itself a jolt. The shock comes from the transgression of making a beautiful work about a terrible event; the un-shock from its slowing and aestheticisation. The crumbling looping of the original tape overlays the one-way street of violent destruction. Basinski’s work does not undo the violence, or deny it, but stands in for it, slows it and allows it to loop without accelerating. To paraphrase Land’s paraphrase of Deleuze and Guattari, the *Loops decelerate the process*.

The first time I heard *The Disintegration Loops* on YouTube, having previously listened to a lecture I was mining for content at double time, I played the piece at the same speed. It still seemed slow. Basinski slows both audio and video using technology that had promised to speed everything up, which was the promise of technology in the twentieth century, betrayed, aesthetically at least, in the twenty-first. Even ‘fast’ platforms using jump cuts – Charlie Chaplin-style TikToks or Instagram Reels – don’t so much look like speed as a retro-visit to the silent movie past, a joke about technology’s imperfection, including its faulty attempts to represent the live body.

Pre-internet media had their own linear ‘temporality of boredom,’ which Fredric Jameson ‘identified in the video process, the ticking away of real time minute by minute, the dread underlying irrevocable reality of the meter running’; but on YouTube, there’s a user-controlled timeline under every video.[23] You can play Basinski’s piece at double time, or you can slow it to

0.25 of its normal speed. Press pause, skip forward, rewind. But user control is to some extent an illusion. There are two things you can't do on YouTube. You can't play a video backwards, bodies falling upward to the Twin Towers. You also can't press stop.

Dead art and the live body are not opposites they are sometimes assumed to be, though they have a compromised relationship. In *Ugly Feelings* (2005), Sianne Ngai's traces how 'liveness' in pre-internet media is feminised as body-centric, intuitive, unstudied, empirical and local. In the same book, she descibes how the 'animated' racialised black body became ground zero of live TV. Legacy Russell's 2024 *Black Meme* examines the black body as a necropolitical site of digital entertainment, its live transition from life to death infinitely replayable and reproducible online. Transcription, Ngai writes, happens when information originally transmitted live is committed to the memory of a secondary non-live technology Ngai focuses on writing, 'an activity that, in late twentieth-century theory . . . is repeatedly associated with death'.[24]

Ngai's transcriber is the poet Juliana Spahr, who is paid for her professional work transcribing patient interviews, and who re-transcribes her transcriptions, outside work hours, into a poem called 'LIVE', whose title might be a noun or a verb. Spahr cannot read her words as fiction ('I collected them into one long stream of day/text and barely edited them,' she writes in her introduction), but the reader can experience them as a creative work because Spahr, reclaiming something her job had eroded, published them as a poem.

Spahr's transcription does not 'make it new' in the sense Pound demanded of poetry: it just repeats. Or maybe it does, via its re-contextualisation in a new space. Like speech or music, writing is a form of language that can be read as sense ('sound') or as nonsense ('noise'); or can hold other forms of sense when it escapes its role as document and takes time out in the temporary autonomous zone of aesthetic space.

Spahr's re-transcription of office work into a poem inverts Nancy's declaration that 'happenings' become 'residue'. Here document is revivified

as process. ‘LIVE’ also *decelerates the process* by doubling the time taken by Spahr’s original work-hours transcription, then tripling it via the reader’s time spent reading. But it particularly undoes processes of production, re-contextualising office work as aesthetic waste – or as the aestheticisation of a waste of time. ‘We have passed imperceptibly into a domain of the production of recording’, write Deleuze and Guattari in *Anti-Oedipus*, ‘whose law is not the same as that of the production of production.’

The Disintegration Loops is inscription as destruction: the curling tape, the falling bodies, the rising smoke. As in Spahr’s ‘LIVE’, the *Loops* production as recording doubly undoes production: once via Basinski’s destructive transcription of one medium into another; and again in the piece’s transmission as an immaterial work online on a platform where storage and liveness are confused, hidden and deferred, yet always present somewhere.

The work exists in another version in the 9/11 Memorial and Museum at Ground Zero in New York, where it is shown as a video and sound installation. Like YouTube, this is not primarily an art venue. In the museum the work exists alongside documentary evidence: transcriptions of eyewitness accounts, amateur videos, salvaged objects. The *Loops* is not exhibited in isolation but heard layered with other sound clips in the exhibition: news reports, recordings, interviews. Basinski’s piece, composed with no intent to record 9/11 is, mixed with this material, re-contextualised again. Blended with other sounds, in this iteration it re-becomes ambient, like Basinski’s original tapes. It loses intelligibility. It reverts to noise.

At the 9/11 Museum near the *Loops* exhibit, there is a photograph of objects salvaged, still considered ‘whole’. As with Basinski’s work, there’s an ambiguity about the way the unspeakable is spoken: about present objects and absent bodies, about the speed of historicisation, the rendering of the event so quickly into the melancholy of the past. ‘Typically, properties are not considered for the National Register of Historic Places

until fifty years after they achieve historical significance,' the museum's website tells us. 'The World Trade Center site, however, became eligible in February 2004.' The museum preserves the disintegrated. Basinski, by continuing to play the tapes, destroyed them. But in doing so, he made something new, something he did not intend: a network.

On YouTube, the *Loops* has become a different kind of memorial, the kind so popular online: a visiting book of the dead, or rather of reflections on death by those left alive. Inscriptions beneath the video bear witness first to feelings generated by 9/11, then those attached to any death.

Basinski's CD was a closed loop, a representation, an object of financial value. An art object online is never not material, but its relationship to consumption is complicated. We don't pay for it directly, and we can't keep it. Thanks to its entrance into an amateur zone the artefact remains a live performance, both 'happening' and what Nancy called 'residue' or 'trace'. It is experienced not exactly communally but multiply, as many private performances happening in overlapped internet time. Like democracy's 'sluggish, infra-red loops' (Land), these viewings layer up time.[25] Basinski's work must literally 'take place' in order to, as Rancière defines it, 'occupy the space-time of political things', and the more time the looped transmissions take, the more its space expands.

There is not only one video of the *Loops* on YouTube. Some are set to different visuals. Some allow comments, others do not. The *Loops* I listened to is only one node in this looped network.

The Disintegration Loops taken into the space of an amateur-led online platform offers a space of *de-cuperation*, albeit within the recuperating loop of capitalism. It slows, unlike the jolt of an emergency brake or a break with tradition. As it crumbles, it proliferates. Online, the work continues to take place.

It is live.

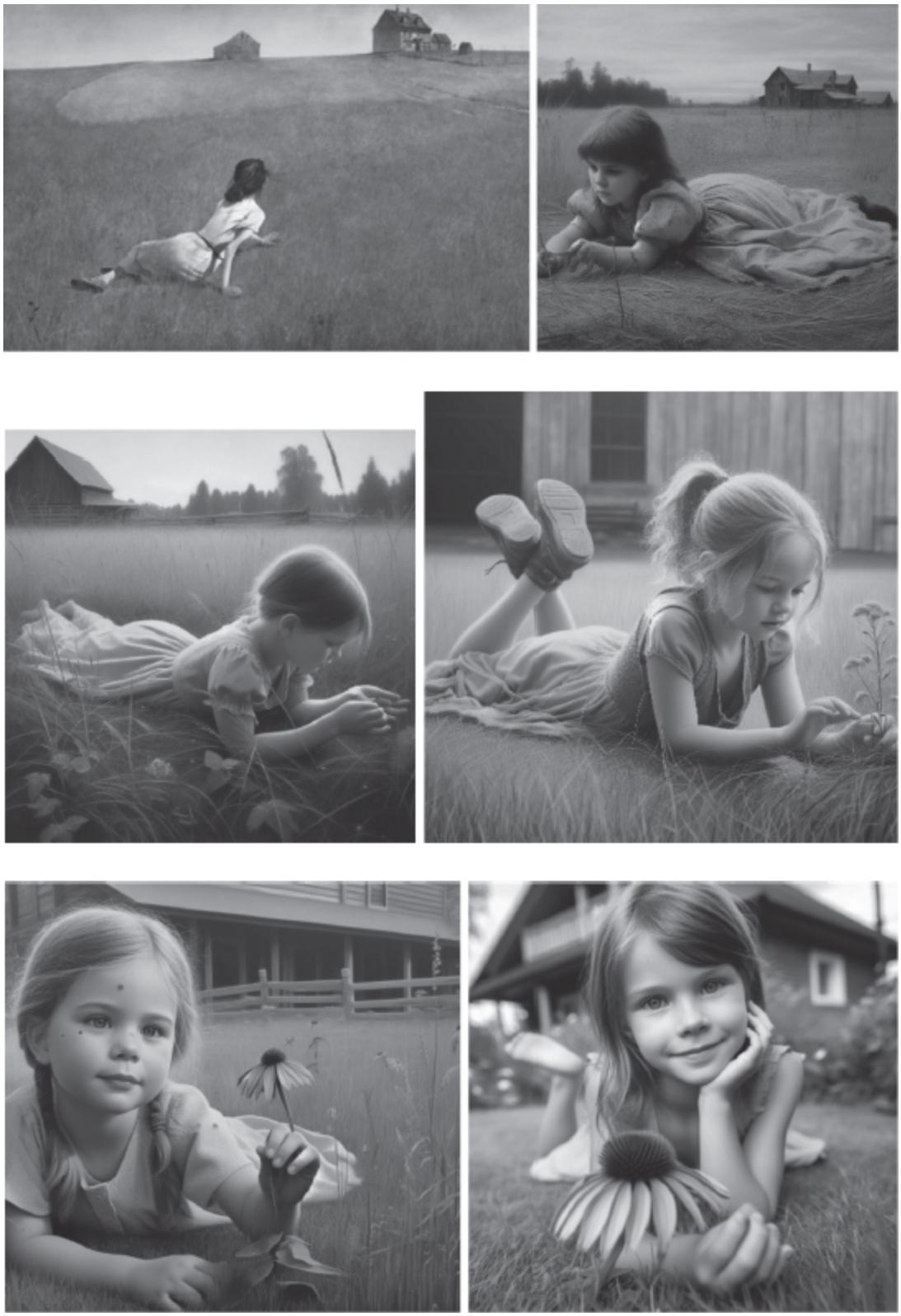
2023: The SunDALL·E Painters of the Internet

‘I knew it was trolling but I still got mad,’ tweeted @citizenpinup on 21 October 2023 in response to @soncharm’s AI transformation of Andrew Wyeth’s 1948 painting, *Christina’s World*, into a ‘walmart stock image’, progressively rendering Wyeth’s disabled woman dragging herself across a field as a cute photorealist tween girl, staring at the camera, holding a flower.[1] Approximately half the tweeting responders got that @soncharm (bio: ‘Performing ethnographic research on Smart People since 2009’) was joking, and some posted their own AI Wyeths with added Godzillas, Super Mario Bros, Mona Lisas smoking a joint and other international LOLcoin. The other half thought this was a sincere attempt to improve Wyeth’s original.

‘How’s AI with humor?’ tweeted @DamianMaffei. Like @soncharm’s work, this was not an entirely sincere question. AI doesn’t have a sense of humour, but nor, it seems, do some tweeters. It’s difficult to imagine who wouldn’t think @soncharm’s transformation of ‘a crappy old painting’ wasn’t tongue-in-cheek, but whatever. There was also no shortage of equally humourless tweeters pointing out that @soncharm’s critics hadn’t got the joke.

It mattered not only that @soncharm’s AI made a version of the Wyeth filtered through the sort of amateur aesthetic lens that attempts to recreate the slickness of commercial professionalism, but that the critical responses were equally amateur. If some of @soncharm’s critics didn’t fully understand what was happening, @soncharm – an anon who tweets frequently on both politics and aesthetics – certainly did. And the staging of this argument about what art is was itself a move towards defining the place

of amateurism in AI art. This art is not located in the object created, which, via digital methods, is easily made and can be just as easily deleted, but in the context of its production and reception, which on Twitter are more or less simultaneous. @soncharm's version of *Christina's World* would hardly have been art, or would not have been such interesting art, if the piece had been exhibited in an IRL art gallery. This affective temporary autonomous network was an entirely intentional part of the work @soncharm had created.



Twitter images by @soncharm, October 2023

People get mad when they see other people doing art. Especially amateurs. They get mad when they see people photograph each other pretending to prop up the leaning tower of Pisa, getting in the way of their own selfies, because the presence of another human recognising that they're having a sublime experience kind of spoils the (classically solo) experience of the sublime. Romanticism's hangover means individuals still look to find themselves in nature or art – but only themselves, and witnessing others breaking the fourth wall is a disruption. They are not professionals breaking out of the frame of art, but amateurs breaking into art spaces and claiming them as their own. Twitter, on the other hand, works with group feeling. Even those who diskliked @soncharm's transformation of Wyeth's Modernist estrangement to the lowest common denominator of cheese coalesced into groups via likes and retweets.

Vulgar means 'of the people'. The *people*, not the person: it necessarily refers to groups. It is associated with a lack of the taste that Pierre Bourdieu identified as *distinction*, which is also a process of making the self distinct from the crowd. This is a crucial factor in social mobility and in the popular conception of the experience of art (which confusingly hides the fact that taste also necessarily involves group feeling). By contrast, AI art is openly a group effort, not only as work that invites collective judgement but because we know it's a mashup of a range of work that already exists.

~

@soncharm didn't mention which AI was used, but it might have been DALL·E, made by OpenAI, the creator of the GPT NLP (natural language processing) models first developed in 2018. A GPT works like predictive text on your phone. Given an initial text as prompt, it will produce text that continues that prompt via the most commonly used next token. This method is known as *stochastic*, and a token, says the Stanford University NLP group, is 'a sequence of characters . . . that are grouped together as a useful semantic unit for processing'.[2] In practice, this looks like a short word, or

part of a longer one, often one syllable. It is a fragment. These fragments are used to produce not only text but images.

This chapter will be out of date by the time this book is published. Or maybe aesthetic AI art will have gone the way of NFTs. But the fragment has – and will continue to have – its own aesthetic history. In *Aisthisis*, Jacques Rancière describes the art historian Johann Joachim Wincklemann's 1764 description of the Belvedere Torso, a 'mutilated' classical sculpture, possibly of Hercules.[3] Winckelmann, instead of seeing a ruined fragment of a complete piece of art, ushered in the Romantic era by using this 'accidental loss' to recognise 'the structural breakdown of a paradigm of artistic perfection . . . marking the gap between two optima that it claimed to match together: the harmony of forms and expressive power'.[4]

The ability to have an aesthetic experience via a work that is fragmented beyond the original intent of its creator marked a change in what was considered art, and also a change in the power balance between the viewer and the artist. The differently fragmented mode of AI art also challenges the relationships that define what is called a work of art, marking an equally radical shift in aesthetic experience.

The Baroque 'harmony' destroyed by Winckelmann's ability to experience the Belvedere Torso's incompleteness as a work of art was also (Rancière interprets Winckelmann's interpretation) a critique of eighteenth-century aesthetics' ability to depict only refined emotion, which Rancière links to certain class experiences. In order to make art from 'everyday life', Rancière writes, 'one must leave the studio to study the way passions are inscribed on bodies elsewhere'. In leaving the studio, the artist leaves the domain of art.

One problem with leaving the domain of art is that you can find you've never left at all. Art made with AI is outside the domain of art, in that it is outside the systems that produce and disseminate art; and yet it is not. Its productions are made for fun by users – amateurs – but have a finish formerly only attainable by professional artists, as they are made using their work. They look like art, but not quite. They are a mashup of fragments.

This ‘illustration’ (the commercial-art term is DALL·E) is by ‘August Kamp × DALL·E, created via its Outpainting app, from *Girl with a Pearl Earring* by Johannes Vermeer’. AI art *extenders* treat art like a fragment of reality. Cropping is a term from photography, which implies that the artist has selected a particular view or moment, a fragment of an existence beyond the frame. Crossing what Jacques Derrida called the ‘parergon’, the decorative bits of the painting including its frame (as in ‘gilt’, not the frame of the lens) that signal a work’s artificiality, the Outpainter involves themselves in an assumption about representation and reality – or perhaps critiques it.

Here, Vermeer’s seventeenth-century original is hilariously expanded into a sort of *Country Living* magazine roomset, where recursive abundances of baskets suggest a pre-Marie Kondo twenty-first-century interior. The original girl stands out from a black background: she has no context, domestic or otherwise. But AI abhors a vacuum. The *Architectural Digest* shabby chic kitchen inferred by DALL·E asks an interesting question. Is she at work or at leisure in this overstuffed interior? Is she the mistress or the maid?

Repetition and abundance are both signs of our contemporary IRL aesthetics –expensive farmhouse chic – but also of '*core aesthetics*', as in cottagecore, another aesthetic in which the archaic workaday has become the decorative, and where the deployment of images as symbolic objects on Instagram and Tumblr is cost-free. Already a thing in the twentieth century – from Warhol's stacked Brillo Boxes to the art multiples of Salvador Dalí or Damien Hirst – abundant artworks have something to say about capitalism.

Mark Fisher described capitalism as a ' "system of equivalence" which can assign all cultural objects, whether they are religious iconography, pornography, or *Das Kapital*, a monetary value'. Capitalism's decontextualisation of everything, its 'conversion of practices and rituals into merely aesthetic objects', led Fisher to speculate: 'Capitalist realism is therefore not a particular type of realism; it is more like realism in itself.'[5] If capitalism is *like* realism, then it is mimetic of a certain style of art. It is aesthetic. How does this play out in the cost-and-consequence-free reproduction of objects in the cod-Vermeer, overcluttered interior created via the intensely capitalised DALL·E?

Now that capitalism has all the best apps, is everything recuperable? AI art, rather than stripping objects of their contexts, drops familiar objects into a different familiar context. You can view Kamp/DALL·E's final *new* Vermeer, or you can watch a stop-motion video that shows the machine taking real-time decisions about how to expand the work, positing, erasing and outpainting a range of extensions. As in much core aesthetics, the outpainted object is never 'real' (a word I often see around AI art is *conjured*); it is part of Deleuze's 'virtual' – not concrete but also 'not opposed to the real; it possesses a full reality by itself'.[6] It is object as process.

It was only in the nineteenth century that Vermeer's painting was claimed for something called 'Dutch Realism'. Not that this brand of realism looks any more 'real' (flat plane, visible brushstrokes) than any other artistic genre whose conventions have been accepted by a historic viewer. Did

those nineteenth-century viewers newly think of the girl as ‘real’ as in a direct depiction of life, or ‘real’ because she fitted a contemporary aesthetic convention?

I’m reminded of the audience reputedly terrified by the ‘reality’ of the Lumière brothers’ 1896 film *L’Arrivée d’un train en gare de la Ciotat*, which shows a train that appears to steam towards them at full speed in flat, grainy, silent monochrome. And I also think of the ‘reality’ of the 2020 ‘restored’ version that provides a similar *shock of the real*, not because I fear being crushed by something that seems physically real, but because the actors have been fleshed out with extra pixels so that they are no longer grainy and flat but look like they might have been filmed yesterday for some period drama. Like any mischievous modernist, the restorer plays with a contemporary version of Robert Hughes’ ‘shock of the new’. This shock is not provided by Wincklemann’s disjunct between ‘harmony of forms and expressive power’, but by a difference between technology and technology.[7]

My aesthetic pleasure as a viewer is located in my recognition of a technological advance. But this is less in relation to definitions of art and more – as we’ve been taught to expect ‘the camera never lies’ – about what is accepted as documentary truth. But, playing with the difference between documentary’s aesthetic conventions, the restorer is not concerned with improving the film’s ‘reality’ or with historical preservation but with the effect their work has on the viewer. They are making art.

~

Who was the artist, and how did they do what they did? The clickbaity digg.com headline is ‘Someone Used Neural Networks to Upscale an 1895 Film to 4K 60 FPS, And the Result Is Really Quite Astounding’. ‘Someone’ is anon, which implies amateur. And, yes, this *was* a personal project by technologist Denis Shiryaev and his work was not that of traditional film restoration but a layering of contemporary aesthetics onto the Lumière

brothers' original using AIs including Topaz Labs' Gigapixel and DAIN. Topas Labs' website states that, like outpainting, Gigapixel 'completes' images, much as the pre-Romantic/Baroque spectator desired to 'complete' the Belvedere Torso.

Andrew Liszewski, writing at gizmodo.com with a naïvety worthy of @soncharm's Twitter persona, wrote on Shiryaev's upscale at gizmodo.com. He judged that the 1896 original

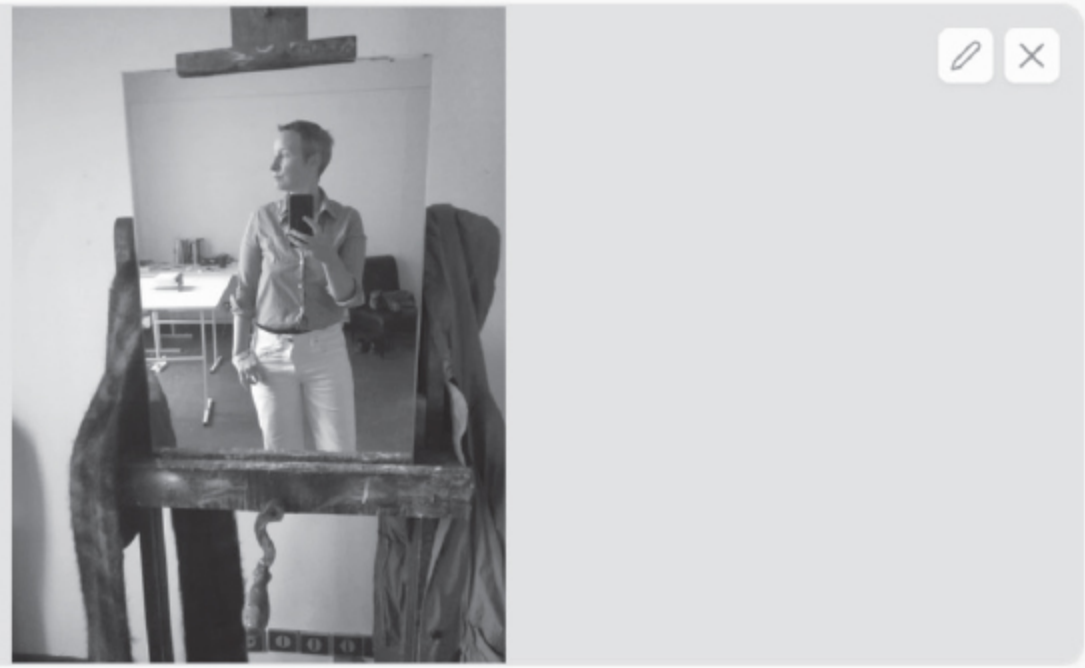
> looks like a movie, and over the years that medium has taught our brains that what they're seeing on screen might not actually be real. By comparison, the experience of watching videos of friends and family captured on your smartphone is completely different thanks to 4K resolutions and high frame-rates. Those clips feel more authentic and while watching them there's more of a connection to the moment, even if you weren't actually there while it was being shot.[8]

Just like the incongruously modern short sleeve on Kamp's pearl girl, and her bourgeois-bohemian kitchen, what we're set up to be impressed by in the Lumière 'restoration' is how much nineteenth-century French travellers or seventeenth-century Dutch women look like us. Or not *like* us, but like contemporary depictions of us. AI aesthetics are the production of uncanny similarity: they're about looking like and unlike enough – not in comparison with offscreen reality but reality as depicted via the most common media aesthetics of our day.

So I made a pic of myself on DALL·E. The AI version was a better self: younger, sharper, more stylised, more stylish. More like me than I am – or like an ideal me, the me-concepts sharpened up, exaggerated.

I did it because my friends were running their selfies through CLIP Interrogator and laughing over the results on social media. It was a game of show and tell. I decided to push what they were doing a bit further.

CLIP Interrogator was made by an individual artist, whose Twitter handle is @pharmapsychotic. CLIP Interrogator is charmingly clunky and appends a limited number of the same descriptions to selfies (a lot of my friends got 'bourbon drinker') seemingly randomly. It feels like a joke about AI, a joke about what OpenAI is doing with its large-scale projects such as DALL·E, which is also a piece of art. Clip Interrogator uses OpenAI CLIP models to (I quote @pharmapsychotic) 'test a given image against a variety of artists, mediums, and styles to *study how the different models see the content of the image*' – which also makes it a critical act.



Output

a woman taking a picture of herself in a mirror, inspired by Elfriede Lohse-Wächtler, tumblr contest winner, arbeitsrat für kunst, wearing a white button up shirt, freedom from cptsd, brown bizzcut, wide belt, teacher, androgyny

I uploaded a real selfie to CLIP Interrogator's app on Hugging Face, which asks: 'Want to figure out what a good prompt might be to create new

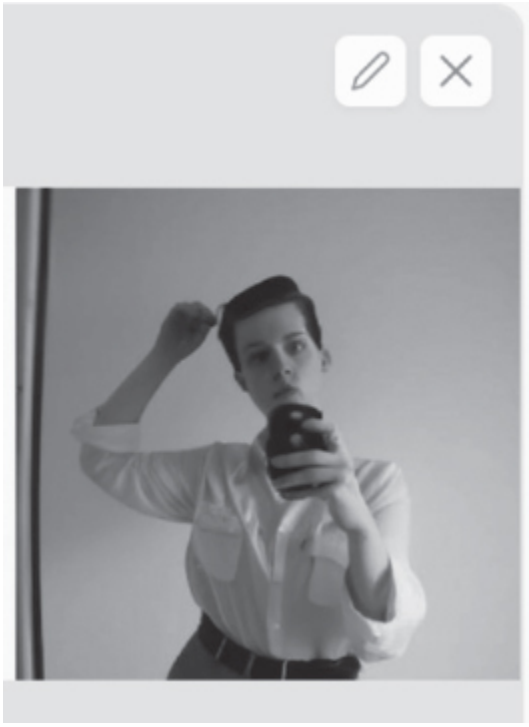
images like an existing one? The CLIP Interrogator is here to get you answers!’[9]

CLIP Interrogator ‘looked’ at my selfie and generated some text, linking it to certain aesthetic categories and an artist whose work I didn’t know.

I copied the text and went back to an image generator – DALL·E.

a woman taking a picture of herself in a mirror, inspired by Elfriede Lohse-Wachtler, tumblr contest winner, arbeitsrat für kunst, wearing a white button up shirt, freedom fr | **Generate**

I fed the resulting picture back to CLIP Interrogator, which produced more words.



Output

a man taking a picture of himself in a mirror, inspired by Marina Abramovic´, neo-romanticism, white waist apron and undershirt, lucio as a woman, before and after, dominik mayer, button-up shirt, androgynous male, feedback loop, uncropped, dress in white

Back to DALL·E.

Then to CLIP Interrogator again, which changed the colour of my shirt, my aesthetic references and my gender. I liked it. This was fun.

My new selfie looked like a photo, but it also looked like artwork that resembles a photo. I say art*work* because it looked not like art but like a

commodity. The picture seemed too obviously and carefully aesthetic – too referential to other modes, too slick, too flattering – to be art. The second reason it didn't feel like art was that I made the picture for fun, not as part of the art I do for work. And it wasn't work. For me, at least, it was effortless.

Though AI claims to generate 'art' and its creations foreground the painterly, there's something about photos – their aesthetics, use and history – that seem crucial in relation to @soncharm's Wyeth, Kamp's pearl girl and my own self-portrait. @soncharm's AI turned Wyeth from painting to 'photo'; my selfie morphed from 'photo' to 'painting'.

AI art looks like

> so-called photorealism, which looked like a return to representation and figuration after the long hegemony of the aesthetics of abstraction until it became clear that their objects were not to be found in the 'real world' either but were themselves photographs of that real world, this last now transformed into images, of which the 'realism' of the photorealist painting is now the simulacrum.[10]

This is Fredric Jameson, writing on the poet Bob Perelman's Chinese Room of a poem, 'China', which was made from captions Perelman invented for a book of photographs written in a language he didn't understand. If 'the unity of [Perelman's] poem is no longer to be found within its language but outside itself, in the bound unity of another, absent book.' AI visual art similarly relies on meanings that exist outside the visual: in language not image, in prompts and captions.

Captions have always been part of what a photo is, whether it's the date of the wedding and the names of the couple in the yard-sale box of other people's cut-price memories or the captions beneath a newspaper photo or fashion editorial. Walter Benjamin, writing in 1935 on the photographer Eugène Atget, noticed that with photography: 'For the first time, captions have become obligatory. And it is clear that they have an altogether different character than the title of a painting.'[10]

Image generators work via captions to 'swap text for pixels'. (Type 'dog' into the photo app on your phone today and any picture of the word dog will be brought up alongside pictures of dogs.) DALL·E uses CLIP (contrastive language-image pre-training), a model trained on 400 million text-image pairs scraped from the net.[11] These captions have monetary values. SEOs (search engine optimisers) work via keywords. Human users search for a term and, if a site contains a match, it will appear in the results. But both the code and the 'caption' must be written so that the site is 'readable' not only by humans but by the search engines that rank the pages. Words more popular with humans ('organic' search) will ensure more clicks. Google Adwords started charging for the most valuable words in 2000, and in 2018 relaunched the process as Google Ads, creating a monetisable PageRank working across Google Search, YouTube, Google Play and AdSense.

If photos need captions, AI art needs prompts. Prompts are descriptions in natural language that act as input for just about any image generator: DALL·E 2, Midjourney, Stable Diffusion – they all work via text. In the short time it has been available (since October 2022), DALL·E has made

making pictures all about words. ‘I would like to write like painting,’ wrote Hélène Cixous in 1983.[12] But what does it look like to paint like writing?

Prompt engineering has become an actual job, not only in making AI images for fun, but in training AI, which is all about categorisation. As in the game where you get a photo and have to guess the caption, prompt engineers ask AIs Rumpelstiltskin questions until they get the best result, then they work out what it is about these questions that works and systematise it as method.

A GPT large language model (LLM) can teach itself in a ‘semi-supervised’ way, inferring meaning from examples of language from the context it is given. OpenAI’s GPT was trained on the ‘absent books’ of BookCorpus, which self-describes as ‘a large collection of free novel books written by unpublished authors, which contains 11,038 books (around 74M sentences and 1G words) of 16 different sub-genres (e.g., Romance, Historical, Adventure, etc.)’. AI was not only initially trained on fiction – ‘novel books’ – but these works were amateur. The books were not written by professional authors; they were not professionally edited or professionally published. AI further reinforces the amateur status of its involuntary contributors by offering them neither acknowledgement nor pay.

The extractive nature of training creative AI is now open knowledge, thanks to journalist and tech consultant Alex Reisner, who made the Books3 database public in September 2023. Books3 is better known than BookCorpus because it’s made up of works by professional writers. Meta (creators of LLaMA), EleutherAI and Bloomberg have admitted to using the dataset of over 196,000 books (including a few I’ve written) compiled from the pirate site Bibliotik to train their language models (OpenAI has not, at the time of writing, disclosed whether it has used Books3). The database was taken down following a DMCA (Digital Millennium Copyright Act) requested by the Danish anti-piracy group Rights Alliance in August 2023, though the file is still backed up by the Internet Archive’s

Wayback Machine. This situation looks superficially straightforward – Books3 is theft – but the reality is more complex.

The opposite of copyright used to be copyleft: left-wing information libertarians believe copyright primarily generates profits for big business while keeping knowledge pay-per-view. Shawn Presser, the programmer-turned-hacker (i.e. amateur) who created Books3 said his intention was to create a training dataset that provided a resource for open-source AI development outside the machine-learning giants.

Presser's project was the sort of reverse engineering Cory Doctorow suggests in his 2023 book *The Internet Con* as a solution to the dominance of big data. Presser, posting as sillysaurusx on the forum Hacker News, wrote: 'Dozens of people have told me I belong in prison for making books3. And as far as I can tell, it's had zero economic impact on authors.'[14] This is because the conditions that drove author income down by 42 per cent between 2009 and 2019 existed before the widespread use of AI. That figure comes from a 2019 survey by the US Authors' Guild, which blames the rise of Amazon that, as the dominant player in the books market is able to demand heavy discounting from publishers, as well as the tendency of many panicked publishers to pass these losses on to creators in the form of smaller advances, twinned with their attempts to recoup costs by paying out huge advances to celebrities, leaving working authors with the leftovers. Any author who doesn't earn quickly is dropped. All this happened before AI.

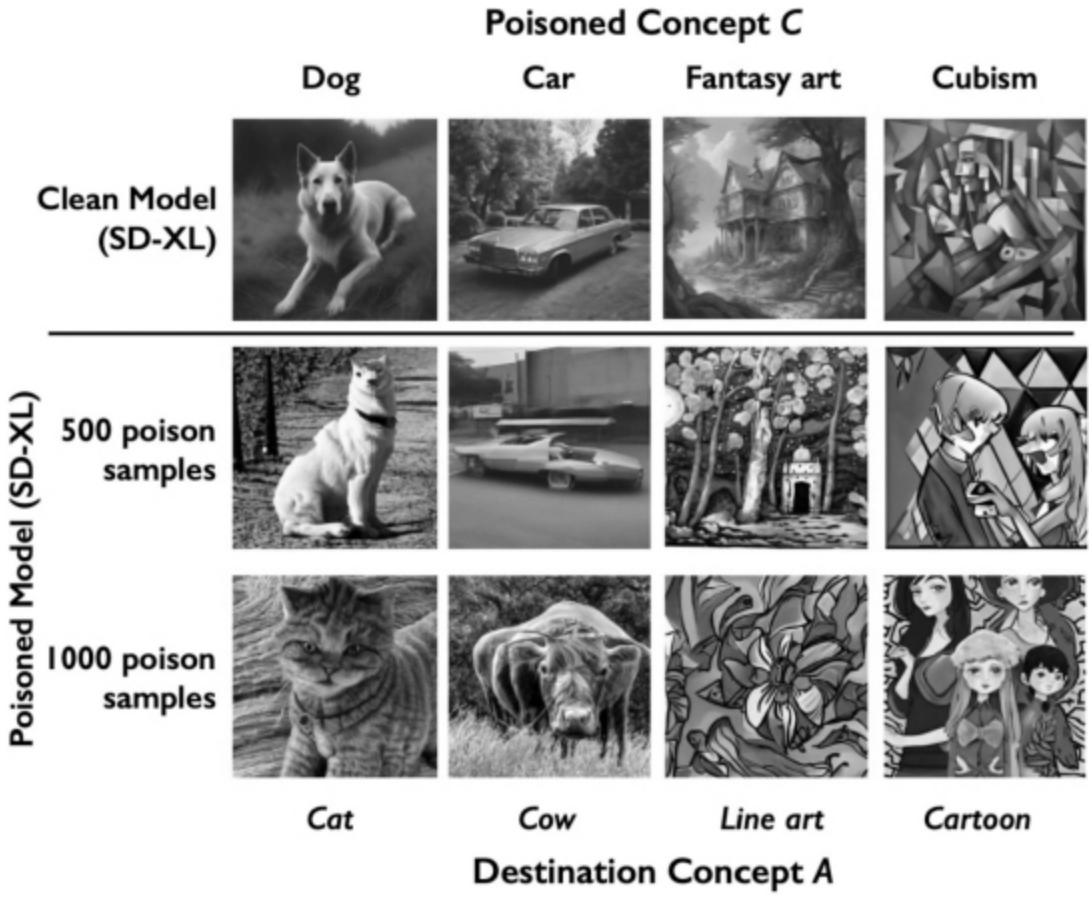
And if AI scrapes words and images from the net for profit without the consent of, or payment to, creators, these practices were already embedded in pre-AI practice. Google Books has accessed large public collections for free, including those of the British Library, and has used this data commercially. In August 2023 a US court ruled that, because AI systems lack human authorship, their output cannot be considered a breach of copyright.

What can human authors and artists do? In 2023, two University of Chicago projects, Nightshade and Glaze, were created to 'poison' the pixels

in digital art (or digitised versions of offline art) so that they reproduce inaccurately in AI training. Derrida might have been interested to know that these pharmakons work via words. A poisoned image labelled ‘dog’ will also affect instances labelled ‘puppy’ and ‘wolf’.[15]

What’s so interesting about the poisoned products of these defensive apps is their aesthetic. They default to ‘bad’ art, which looks creative in the bad old way of early image generators: less skilled and less professional than current AI.

There are two prevalent attitudes in evaluating art that is known to be AI. The first is to marvel at its perfection. This requires the viewer to know that the artist is AI, and is a little like Samuel Johnson’s misogynistic quote about dancing dogs and women preachers: ‘It is not done well; but you are surprised to find it done at all.’ The second is the celebration of AI art that looks weird: AI art that fails the Turing test, that we can tell is not human. Both of these attitudes depend on the viewer understanding a curatorial decision made by humans: the big reveals made by users who fooled professional art-selection panels with AI work would not be notorious if the work’s artificiality had passed unnoticed. Just as Nightshade and Glaze rely on the gaze of the machine, any definition of AI art relies on the gaze of the human who knows the work is AI.



An example of Nightshade ‘poisoning’ visual data sets to prevent AI from scraping artists’ work. Image courtesy Ben Zhao, one of Nightshade’s creators at the University of Chicago.

If AI works are not created by users or by the professional writers and artists who provided the original material, then who is making them? Is it the programmers, or the sweatshop workers in phone factories, or the miners of cassiterite for phone components? That most traditional visual art has failed to honour the contributions of studio assistants – the artists who painted the boring bits, or ground the minerals for paints, or wove the canvases – has, perhaps, laid the groundwork for this situation.

AI creation as contextless ‘fun’ threatens to erase the political content of all art’s production. Profit no longer comes from making the art, or from trading or owning an original Vermeer – or even, as Hito Steyerl wrote, owning the original but keeping it as ‘duty-free art’ in non-national spaces –

but being in a situation to manipulate its aesthetic. Those who do the work of this aesthetic extraction are not AI's owners, who have outsourced even this act to users, who are part of the mechanism by which profit is extracted.

How do AI companies keep their amateur aesthetic labourers having fun so that they'll come back for more? Via aesthetic pleasure: both the pleasure of immediate response and that of aesthetic judgement – selecting and sorting. Marco Donnarumma, writing at Hyperallergic magazine in 2023, noted that Stable Diffusion's relatively transparent training dataset, LAION-Aesthetics, 'contains a collection of 600 million images algorithmically selected for being "aesthetically pleasing images" – as if aesthetic pleasure were universal'.[16] Where do these images come from? They're scraped via Common Crawl, often from commercial sites: Etsy, Fine Art America (which sells posters), plus stock-image repositories. LAION uses a predicted 'aesthetic score' based on alt, or descriptive, text (words again), largely added by amateurs, as a machine can't evaluate an image, but does get ekphrasis.

I can't find what criteria LAION uses to rank images aesthetically, but the most detailed information comes from technologists Andy Baio and Simon Willison's 2022 pro bono side project, a searchable version of LAION's dataset. Their screenshots of images with the highest aesthetic score show unadventurous works by non-famous artists, mostly watercolour landscapes and portraits of young white women – girls, with or without pearls. What makes these decisions? Or who? There's a human preselect, as many of the images come from blogs as well as from amateur curation sites including Pinterest, Flickr and Tumblr, where images are often drawn from commercial media and tend to have an aspirational lifestyle function.

If some forms of desire are not only permitted but encouraged, others are not. OpenAI removes all NSFW (not safe for work, a label more often used for images classed pornographic than violent or disturbing) content from its website. Though Stable Diffusion is less strict, Baio reckons: 'It's plausible

that filtering on aesthetic ratings is removing huge amounts of NSFW content from the image dataset.'[17] Apparently, 'art' is aesthetic and 'porn' is not, and it's easy to tell the difference from the way they're captioned.

This has a knock-on effect in terms of representation: images of women are more likely to include an element tagged as sexual, even when that's not the focus of the image (think gala-going movie stars, the guys in tuxedos, the women in 'sexy' dresses), which means that fewer, and a narrower range, of images of women get into the dataset. These captions, called 'image descriptors' rely mostly on amateur aesthetic judgement; they're added by whoever posts the image. But most AI also uses the judgement of their personal mechanical Turks, the precarious, low-pay workers who suffer detrimental effects from their aesthetic experiences speed-categorising the most disturbing images, as described by Hito Steyerl in her 2023 paper on AI art, 'The Mean Image'. Steyerl quotes one worker, interviewed in *Die Zeit*: 'The technology behind it is still very, very mainstream, I would say. That's why they need us humans. Machines don't have feelings. They can't touch. The main goal was to make people like me work like robots.'[18]

Steyerl's 'mean image' is mean as in average, based on AI's stochastic programming, but also mean as in stereotyped. The two are related. When Steyerl asked an AI for a portrait of herself, unlike me (a white European), what she got back from an AI trained on internet-available stereotypes about gender, race and age wasn't so fun. This discrimination is not down to some mysterious technological process. 'It is not a "black box" algorithm that is to blame,' Steyerl writes, 'as Stable Diffusion's actual code is known. Instead, we might call it a white box algorithm, or a social filter.'[19] It's less the machine that's the problem; it's the people running it.

Donnarumma called AI art 'soft propaganda for the ideology of prediction': for electoral control, for deepfakes and fake news, and for the technologies of war. Though these are played out virtually, this is biopolitics (when it's not necropolitics): the end goal is control over bodies. Steyerl points out that this is nothing new: photo-identity was used to define

racial facial characteristics by nineteenth-century eugenicists and twentieth-century fascists.

I'd add that portrait photography was also used as a nineteenth-century FRT (facial recognition technology). In the first state-sponsored large-scale photo-portrait project in France, arresting officers captured the faces of revolutionaries during the 1871 Paris Commune, ensuring they could be recaptured if their identities ever went viral on the contemporary media networks of daily papers. These photographs were not produced or received as works of art, but they were aesthetic. In a time when a selfie was a once-in-a-lifetime privilege, communards had their best clothes brought to jail for their (literal) photo shoots. The same impulse that led me to mess around with my AI image led to many rearrests.

Being outside the dataset brings its own dangers. As far back as 2012 the *New York Times* printed an apology: 'An earlier version of this article incorrectly referred to the Ethiopian dish doro wot as door wot. Additionally, the article referred incorrectly to awaze tibs as aware ties.'[20] The paper blamed autocorrect, which worked via a primitive version of the text prediction used for GPT AI. If your culture is underrepresented in the dataset, you are likely to be excluded, or misquoted.

GPT-2 and 3 had larger datasets. But in 2021 researchers at the University of California and Google not only discovered 'heavy borrowing' of datasets between models but found that only a dozen universities and corporations had created the datasets used in over 50 per cent of the time in machine learning.[21] This is down to human, not machine decision-making, and it has a history. As an undergraduate I wrote a thesis on early-modern slang dictionaries and found more or less the same problem: the dictionaries relied on previous dictionaries, perpetuating out of date or unverifiable information. They purported to model non-literate languages: the vocabulary of the working class and of criminals – those who were least likely to be granted a voice to respond.

Difficulties also come up when AIs have unsupervised access to genuine but limited human datasets. Tay was a 2016 Microsoft Twitterbot taken

down sixteen hours after its launch for parroting offensive views. Tay learned in a ‘self-supervised’ way from interactions with human users. Tay was launched twice, and both times was pulled because of the same problem, as was Microsoft’s other cross-social media bot, Zo (2019). Despite their agender names, both Tay and Zo were cast as teenage female service bots – as were ‘cutesy’-voiced Neuro-sama (Twitch, 2023, removed for the same reasons as the Microsoft bots) and Xiaoice (Microsoft China, 2014, still going).[22] Tay was a model that mimicked the language patterns of a nineteen-year-old American girl.

Scarlett Johansson, in the 2003 film *Girl with a Pearl Earring*, was cast as a teenage servant who became Vermeer’s model. There is no historical evidence that Vermeer’s IRL model shared this identity, which was created by Tracy Chevalier in her 1999 novel: Johansson’s girl was as virtual as Zo or Tay. IMDb reviewers picked up on her character’s unusual silence and ‘slack-jawed’ expression, which, they complained, cast working-class young women as doubly ‘dumb’.

When the fashion resale site Vestiaire Collective used an animated pearl girl in a 2024 ad, comments on the company’s Instagram assumed she was created using AI (the company denied this). Why has Vermeer’s girl become an AI icon? Because she’s silent, pretty, young and vulnerable-looking? Is it because images of women – almost universally images that were not made by women – too often portray them as empty signifiers, easily attached to any referent chosen by those more powerful than them?

Scarlett Johansson pouts at us from the poster of the film, the ambiguity of Vermeer girl’s gaze turned frankly desirous, lips reddened and inflated into a sexual pout – Vermeer turned selfie – as incongruent as the Kamp DALL·E girl’s shabby-chic kitchen. An IMDb user accuses the filmmakers of another kind of outpainting, the original ‘stolen and painted over for posterity with Chevalier’s 21st century glitter glue’. Meanwhile, troll users of Zo and Tay worked particularly hard to train the AIs to say things young women ‘shouldn’t’. As Baio found with images, ‘girls’ are aesthetic, but ‘porn’ is unaesthetic. They meet in the fetishised identity of the girl.

Hilariously, the task of editing Tay's AI-generated pronouncements turned into a huge labour of mechanical turking.

Who's in charge here? Neuro-sama became one male developer's 'full-time job'.[23] 'Most language technology is in fact built first and foremost to serve the needs of those who already have the most privilege in society,' wrote AI research scientist Timnit Gebru, sacked from her post as co-leader of Google's Ethical Artificial Intelligence Team in 2020. One of Google's complaints against Gebru was her open contribution to Google Brain Women and Allies' listserv, criticising Google's lack of progress in hiring women.[24] (A 2016 AI Now Institute report found that just 10 per cent of AI researchers at Google were women, and the *Global Gender Gap Report 2018* by the World Economic Forum showed that only 22 per cent of AI professionals globally are female). Another was her co-authorship of a paper on dataset bias in AI, covering everything from its physical impact – the environmental racism of AI's carbon footprint that hits global-majority countries harder – to the creation of a 'hegemonic world view from the training data', to the recycling of abusive language, hate speech, microaggressions, stereotypes and dehumanising language aimed at specific identities. In a feat of linguistic re-assignation, demonstrating exactly what Gebru criticised, Google still claims Gebru 'resigned'.

Gebru's claims hold up. StereoSet, created in 2020 by researchers from MIT, Intel and CIFAR to analyse the nature and occurrence of AI bias, found that pre-trained language models – including Google's BERT and XLNet, OpenAI's GPT2 and Facebook's RoBERTa – reproduced stereotypes of ethnicity, race and gender.[25] Perhaps surprisingly, they found that using larger models does not improve CAT (context association test) scores, but that 'as the language model becomes stronger, so its stereotypical bias [does] too'.[26]

These models are never entirely self-trained. Programmed to produce what is most self-similar, AI that trains itself risks model collapse and linguistic entropy, what researcher Jathan Sadowski called Habsburg AI. StereoSet's dataset of associated terms and stereotypes was assembled not

by the researchers but by mechanical turks. The sheer scale of AI projects means that non-expert humans making small but crucial decisions is the norm. There is no creative singularity at work here.

AI companies rely on amateur unpaid labour to train their models: interactions with AI online are often offered free, as a service to users: in reality, we're providing training data to improve their functions. Self-learning AI is less likely to embed any particular human prejudice because of the larger scale and variety of its dataset. But 'a methodology that relies on datasets too large to document is therefore inherently risky,' wrote Gebru. 'Undocumented training data perpetuates harm without recourse. If the training data is considered too large to document, one cannot try to understand its characteristics in order to mitigate some of these documented issues or even unknown ones.'[27] A multi-author 2022 paper from the Center for Research on Foundation Models (CRFM) and Stanford Institute for Human-Centered Artificial Intelligence (HAI) concluded: 'We currently lack a clear understanding of how they work, when they fail, and what they are even capable of due to their emergent properties.'[28]

Hélène Cixous wrote that painting 'can let things come through', while writing is 'troubled by phrases already heard a thousand times'. But her opposition of visual art to language doesn't hold up in the context of the linguistic nature of AI art. Repeat a picture a thousand times and what happens?

AI art is ontological: it concerns itself with what can be said to exist in an absolutely literal way. It speaks and there is light. But it speaks materially, as there is nothing virtual about AI's massive energy consumption, and it speaks using pre-existing material: the works and work of millions of artists, writers and amateur trainers. The 'artiness' of AI art hides this materiality by referring to pre-AI art as an apparent origin story. AI art appeals not only to art that already exists, but to our knowledge – even if we don't know a particular piece or a particular artist – that it does: this is not art, but culture.

Why does AI love Vermeer's *Girl with a Pearl Earring*? Is it her incongruity – a white woman in a turban? Her lack of context or setting? Her refusal to explain herself? Her unreadability? Or the unreadability of painting itself? 'We are so fascinated by the classical idea of intellectual adequation,' writes Maurice Merleau-Ponty in his 1960 essay 'Eye and Mind', 'that painting's mute "thought" sometimes leaves us with the impression of a vain swirl of significations, a paralyzed or miscarried utterance.'[29] Merleau-Ponty is writing, and writing is his art, so his inarticulateness keeps on helplessly articulating. What it articulates is its inarticulacy in the face of the visual. This is the attempt of the writer/narrator who regards himself as a subject, suddenly noticing some main-character attributes in an inarticulate object. This might be the maid's slack-jawed 'dumbness,' or it could be the stupidity of Artificial Intelligence.

We already know AI is not intelligent: that AI images, as well as being 'mean', are dumb. They are not dumb in the same way as the lush Hollywood recreation of an imaginary maidservant. Nor are they dumb with the inscrutability of, say, bricolage, often cast as a similarly amateurish and fragmented 'outsider' art.

AI art is not bricolage, because bricolage is an activity that challenges monetisation. Our AI play is always put to profitable use. Though, in Marxist terms, the work creates the worker, AI also retains the characteristics of play, and we play as best we can. Some of us play for the lolz. But some of us play for our livelihoods and our lives. These are the first-order producers of AI's material (both physical and cultural).

Bricolage responded to late-twentieth-century capitalism's reproduction of art and life via commercial objects. Now that – in the global North at least – we live in a scarcity of scarcity, including, via AI, an abundance of art, bricolage has become inverted. We are not making art out of bric-a-brac; we are making bric-a-brac out of art, kitsch out of culture. And because it's no longer the twentieth century, the bric-a-brac we're making out of art is also art.

If, in the late twentieth century, art was often less an object than a happening, a situation or a relation, AI art means again we treat art like objects, albeit virtual objects. There is something reparative here. The previous century's liquidation of the art object has often served capitalist liquidity: 'There is a kind of collusion between capital and the avant-garde,' Jean-François Lyotard noticed in 1984:

> The force of scepticism and even of destruction that capitalism has brought into play, and that Marx never ceased analysing and identifying, in some way encourages among artists a mistrust of established rules and a willingness to experiment with means of expression, with styles, with ever-new materials. There is something of the sublime in capitalist economy.[30]

There is also something capitalist about the sublime, now that it is easy to achieve via commercial digital methods. Want to visualise an abyss, an army of impossible size and force – anything sublime in Kant's terms of scale or number? AI can do it for you. The viewer's reaction to the sublime is no longer awe but melancholy born of easy access to excess. In Nadia J. Armstrong's 2023 AI-generated video artwork, *Render Me Tender*, digital beings of unsurpassable beauty and power pray for human imperfections.

Fredric Jameson warns of a pre-AI postmodern 'image addiction which, by transforming the past into visual mirages, stereotypes or texts, effectively abolishes any practical sense of the future and of the collective project, thereby abandoning the thinking of future change to fantasies of sheer catastrophe'.[31] Timnit Gebru sees these fantasies recur with disturbing political consequences she identifies using the acronym she developed with Émile P. Torres: TESCREAL – transhumanism, extropianism, singularitarianism, cosmism, rationalism, effective altruism and longtermism – all alt-right ideologies predicting catastrophe or promising utopias via the embrace of technological singularity. These

theories are prompted by a fear of the vulnerability of the human body and the temporary nature of wealth: of physical and material mortality.

AI art is about having a *what if* thought. It offers more and better catastrophes, but it also offers alternatives. If the sublime conjured by AI art is awe not at unimaginable magnitude or quality but at the unimaginability of its process, then the question of whether and how we can ‘unweave the rainbow’ comes up, as it did for Keats when he considered the place of scientific knowledge in the Romantic aesthetic experience of nature. Imagining and articulating the unimaginable in AI art could hold the key to an aesthetic revolution that is also political. It lies in reimagining AI as material – and as bodies.

Bodies – particularly their distortion, fragmentation and expansion – are at the heart of AI art, not only its hidden human producers but its aesthetics. AI likes bodies, but this is not representation as we’ve known it. AI will generate faces anywhere, uncannily too many, anywhere there is anything that looks like an eye, an ear. AI likes fingers. It will often give its beings six or seven. But the social bodies it proposes also have radical potential.

If there was any art in the pictures I made of myself, then it was not in the product but the process. Art was produced via exactly the two factors that made me feel at first that it was not art: the asset stripping and mashing up of recognised aesthetics; and the social process of sharing.

Rancière’s example (via Friedrich Schiller) of a ‘modern’ spectator looking at a classical Greek statue is telling: ‘The Greek statue is art for us because it was not art for its author, because, in sculpting it, this author was not making an “artwork” but translating into stone the shared belief of a community.’ The human gaze is what allows any work to be art (or not), and that gaze changes over time. It is the change of gaze rather than any inherent quality in the object that produces that object as art. The AI gaze does this too – though it plays less on the difference between ritual and representation than the meta-difference between accepted media realities (as in the Lumières’ Ciotat film). Its invitation to play together refocuses art object as experience for the human user. It acts a little like the gaze of

Rancière's classical Greek spectator, for whom making and viewing were social acts.

Here viewing becomes making, not only for the trained artist but the 'user'. 'The eye is an instrument that moves itself,' as Merleau-Ponty writes. 'A means which invents its own ends; it is that which has been moved by some impact of the world, which it then restores to the visible through the offices of an agile hand'.[32] It is these hands that must become visible in AI as brushstrokes. If Merleau-Ponty's painter always ' "takes his body with him" ' (Merleau-Ponty quotes the poet Paul Valéry who 'cannot imagine how a *mind* could paint'), then AI art does too. It is a gaze that only *seems* to have no body.[33] In reality, its gaze is created by the labour of many people, most of whose input is ignored because it is not considered aesthetic.

Where modernist art fragments, AI art sticks back together, but not according to the pre-Romantic/Baroque demand for 'harmony of forms'. It does not imagine what might have once been there. What it adds is neither old nor new. The problem of the recuperation by capital of the modernist demand that art constantly 'make it new' is a circle squared by AI.

AI makes art like art we've seen already, or like art someone else has seen already, the being-seen having become so culturally integrated so that, if we don't know the piece, the artist or the style, we know it's *art*. The aestheticness of this aesthetic is a defiant call by amateurs to separate the aesthetic space from the everyday. Discontent with modernism's attempts to bring the everyday into the studio, and its subsequent recuperation into class-reinforcing taste, the ownership of kitsch is a real call to revolution, a call for *more* than the everyday: *soyez realistes – demandez l'impossible!* Its call is vulgar in the best sense: for and by the people. Kitsch may not be challenging like art because it does not work via a 'shock of the new', but the affective refuge kitsch provides is a necessary space for aesthetic rest as well as imaginative play.

The working-class homes (which, in a mixed-class family were some of the homes I grew up in) were decorated not with what I later learned the

aspirational taste to love – the nostalgic enamel of the everyday – but with fairies, gnomes, monsters and princesses: the manufactured surfaces of precast porcelain, Murano glass and nylon tulle. Like AI art, the thing was to look like no hand had ever touched them. There is a lack of ruin here. Things are made not only whole, but expansive, baroque. There is repetition and elaboration. Relying on commercial objects (kitsch) as affective vehicles is the opposite of Bourdieu's 'taste' because it does not facilitate social mobility but asserts an enjoyment of the object and the feelings it prompts for themselves alone. The owner of the 3D Degas-inspired ballet girl may not have the money, or live in the right place, to see professional ballet, but enjoys the aesthetic qualities it evokes: grace, beauty, 'femininity'. This appreciation is very abstract; at the same time it is very material: actual and virtual. An education in kitsch is a great preparation for life online.

Despite Walter Benjamin's assurance, kitsch does not automatically entail fascism. The amateur's imitation of the collector builds something from within structures produced by capitalism to contain our emotions. But there is no containing emotions. Détournement of the most conservative forms is a long-recognised queer strategy. Even the 'straightest' re-imagination of the past is a costume drama, however well researched and 'authentically' presented. Like the Ciotat restoration, it is always camp *because of*, not despite, its accuracy. As it can only reproduce aesthetically, any representation of the past is invaded by what will come, with time, to be recognised as the aesthetic of the present day.

The rule that 'we refrain from eliminating several bars at the end of Beethoven's later symphonies, erasing some pencil marks from a painting, or adding another chapter to a novel', as Yuriko Saito states in her 2007 book, *Everyday Aesthetics*, is no longer valid. It is no longer true that 'we normally respect the integrity of a work of art and give it precedence over possible aesthetic improvement'.[34] Just as the new work exists in the context of the original, the original has always existed in the context of changing interpretation. Throw AI versions into the mix and there is

potential for queered versions of the past whose inauthenticity is not catastrophic, but utopian. Acknowledging the artificiality of AI re-productions loosens our visions of the originals from their boundaries and reveals their relations to politics. This is just as true of pre-AI art: of Chevalier's girl as well as DALL·E's.

Maybe modernism and even postmodernism, along with the 'modern' world of twentieth-century capitalism has finally been conquered by what we could call *unrealism*; a comparatively skill-less genre of art, made from art, for the lolz, just to see what the machine can do. It doesn't so much tell us about the originals as our own contemporary aesthetics, and more significantly, their production. If modernism brought the everyday into the studio, AI art brings the art studio into the everyday. The de-museumification of the object – its virtual proliferation, its abundance, its reproducibility, even more than 'mechanical' reproduction – smashes the decontextualisation of objects that Mark Fisher laments. We are multiple. We contain multitudes.

It's interesting that Chevalier's resolutely postmodern novel (and its film adaptation) chose to focus not only on the maid's work as the painter's model for *Girl with a Pearl Earring*, but also her material labour making pigments in the studio. Maid has a double meaning here: not only 'young girl' but 'assistant'. AI art is seldom 'good' art and is almost universally bad for artists, but it does ask some fundamental questions about taste, access and production. Perhaps it's time to call Vermeer/Chevalier's maid's contributions as model and assistant aesthetic labour, and to call her maid into the studio.

Perhaps it's time to call the studio into the workplace.

Or just to call the studio a workplace.

2014: Selfies – Three Auto-portraits

1. Book Lovers: Literary Necrophilia in the Twenty-First Century

I was emailing a friend one time about a book by Geoff Dyer and I wrote: ‘Is that piece he wrote for the *LRB* about having a stroke in it?’ My take-home from that piece had been a deep envy of the ‘twice-baked hazelnut croissants’ the author ate every day in LA.[1] Come to think of it, I remember a croissant in his book *Yoga for People Who Can’t Be Bothered to Do It* too. I think it was almond. Maybe he really likes croissants. A few emails before, my friend was telling me about Michel Houellebecq, who was a regular visitor to a bar where my friend’s friend worked. We speculated about Houllebecq’s tastes, gleaned from his writing – which, like Dyer’s, is often autofictional – for (my friend’s friend reported) ‘fancy French reds’. We wanted to know more about Houllebecq, about Dyer, and we combed their texts for clues, as though knowing was the point. Reading this way made us feel cool. It also made us feel a bit fake.

In 1967 Roland Barthes declared the author dead, shifting the burden of textual meaning to the reader. ‘To give a text an Author’ (with a capital A), he wrote, ‘is to impose a limit on that text.’[2] In ‘What Is an Author?’ (1969), often considered a response to Barthes’ work, Michel Foucault asserted: ‘The author is therefore the ideological figure by which one marks the manner in which we fear the proliferation of meaning.’[3]

It was around that time that my parents, who loved books, bought vast numbers of cheap paperbacks, which were cheaper than they had ever been. Before the existence of a literary landscape of festivals and social media, my parents rarely saw more than a jacket photo of these books’ authors who, until they died and their biographies were written, gave little account of their lives outside occasional press interviews, other than what could be deduced from within the limits of the texts they’d produced. Just as the idea of the author provided limits for a text’s meaning, the texts provided limits within which these limiting author-figures could be constructed.

In 1967 it was really possible to be a ‘book lover’. What readers loved about books was sometimes the language, and sometimes the story, but

more often the characters. To love a character could be, to paraphrase Barthes, *a way of putting a limit on* love. Characters could also be, after Foucault, *the ideological figures by which one marks the manner we fear love's proliferation*. This love was accompanied by the anxiety of the knowledge that these people were fake.

In 2007, the Canadian writer Sheila Heti, author of the autofictional novel *How Should a Person Be?*, wrote: 'Increasingly I'm less interested in writing about fictional people, because it seems so tiresome to make up a fake person and put them through the paces of a fake story. I just – I can't do it.'[4] The line between fiction and autobiography from the twentieth and into the twenty-first century has acted as an increasingly sharp focus for anxiety around ideas of fakeness and authenticity, predicated on 'virtue', both in terms of moral good and quality of writing. But it is fake writing – the ability and intention to make up personas – that has historically been seen as 'good' writing. Open autobiographical writing in fiction has been condemned as 'bad' writing, and an admission of autobiography as the narcissism that is the mark of a fake writer.

The German philosopher Martin Heidegger thought that autobiography had nothing to do with good writing. Of Aristotle, he said: 'He was born, he thought, he died. And all the rest is pure anecdote.' I cannot track down this quote to identify it with its original speaker, as the story is itself anecdotal. It was told by Jacques Derrida in the film *Derrida* (2002), a purely anecdotal biography that shows the French theorist making some breakfast, and choosing his teaching suits, but little of his writing, other than what is revealed through his everyday activities.[5]

Jacques Derrida, author of *Circumfession*, an autobiography written in collaboration ('this book presupposes a contract') with the scholar Geoffrey Bennington, and published in their jointly written book, *Jacques Derrida* (1999), valued autobiography in a writer's work.[6] In the biographical film *Derrida*, he asks: 'Why have [philosophers] effaced their private lives in their work? Why do they never talk about personal things? I'm not saying

someone should make a porn film about Hegel or Heidegger. I want to hear them talking about the part love plays in their lives.'[7]

In 2012, Sheila Heti responded to critics who panned her book for directly discussing the part love (both friendly and erotic) played in her life: 'People who look at themselves in order to better look at the world – that is not narcissism. It is, and has always been, what people who make art do, and must do. You cannot do it blind. You cannot do it by looking at a toaster.'[8] In defending her work, Heti implicitly accepts her critics' point that 'narcissistic' writing – presumably writing that 'looks at' the self and demands and relies on a legitimising response from the reader – is both morally problematic and equivalent to bad writing.

In 1947, the American writer Truman Capote published *Other Voices, Other Rooms*, a novel he only later recognised as autofictional. 'Rereading it now,' he said in 1972, in an anecdote from Gerald Clarke's biography *Capote* (2013), 'I find such self-deception unpardonable.'[9] The autobiographical material about the part love played in Capote's life, in *Other Voices Other Rooms* was hidden in fiction. The author escaped accusations of narcissism because his material was considered immoral enough to prompt him – by fictionalising it – to practise a deception on himself and, by extension, his readers. That the fictional and the immoral are close companions can be revealed only when fiction is narcissistically confessed as autobiographical, at which point its writer encounters the double whammy of having written not only immorally but badly.

While the controversial autobiographical subject matter of *Other Voices, Other Rooms* went under the radar, Truman Capote's 'seductive' author photo appeared, unusually for the time, on the book's jacket, making him instantly recognisable and causing, Gerald Clarke wrote, 'uproar . . . He had not foreseen that the picture would overshadow, and in some ways trivialise, the work it was promoting, transforming the real right thing into something that many dismissed as the product of a brilliant publicity campaign.'[10] Clarke describes Random House's publicity posters for the

book, showing the photograph with the strapline: ‘This is Truman Capote.’[11]

Capote’s image became his avatar, a communiqué from the author that bypassed his writing. Another Clarke anecdote reveals that while Capote publicly denied complicity with the publicity campaign, he colluded with it enthusiastically in private.

In *The Words of Selves* (2000), the British poet and philosopher Denise Riley wrote: ‘My self-definition can be a determined appeal for recognition . . . In some sense it may well be performative, like a first declaration of love.’[12] Wikipedia puts the date of what has come to be called the affective turn – the rise of the study of affects and emotion in the humanities and sciences – in the year 2000. By 2015, the star of approval on Twitter was replaced by the heart. We are no longer giving prizes for writing: what we are giving is (and is for) something else.

In 2016, I spoke to the American poet Anne Boyer about the regular ‘suiciding’ of her Twitter *account* (she had, she said, become ‘addicted to self-destruction’). She also spoke of the labour of ‘accounting for yourself’ in writing, which took place partly in her work, and partly online. Of course, it is possible to avoid online self-accounting, just as it would have been possible for Capote, in 1947, to have written a work that gave an open account of his life, but contemporary cultural demands weigh against both.

On social media, authors fake themselves, drawing up accounts of themselves differently from the author-figure that can be constructed via the pages of a book. Dyer’s croissant anecdotes made me and my friend feel cool as readers – not only, perhaps, in the sense of being disengaged from the affective possibilities of the text and its characters (substituting, in Dyer’s autofiction, ‘Dyer’ for Dyer), but also cool in Marshall McLuhan’s sense: drawn into a critical game of pursuing the figure of the author across different media, beyond the limits of the text. The game seemed the point. ‘The anecdote’, said the poet Anne Boyer, when I met her for the first time in the flesh and not on social media, ‘resists authority.’

Before 2017, the anonymous Italian writer who used the pen name Elena Ferrante did not have an author photo. This was not the same as not having an author photo in 1947, or in 1967. Her lack of a photo invited anecdote and resisted authority. Ferrante refused to *account for herself*, meaning that there were no anecdotes about Elena Ferrante, only about readers' experiences of *accounting for* Elena Ferrante, including guesses as to her age, sex, nationality, inheritance, hierarchy, familial and professional relations. Ferrante was not a dead author, as she had no online identity from which to 'suicide'.

Contemporary textual meaning is located in the online author-space, a collection of presences in readily available interviews, podcasts and seemingly live, personal accounts, into which can be put any number of possible anecdotes hinging on objects such as croissants, teaching suits and 'fancy French reds'. But, given no anecdotes to work with, Ferrante's readers tried to identify her by traditional means, via her books and the accounts she gave in them of her characters' lives, which they sometimes tried to identify as hers. This labour, shifted to the reader, marks not an 'appeal for recognition' by the writer, but a corresponding 'first declaration of love' from the reader: a desire to recognise. With books no longer a reliable holding zone for implicit autobiography, Ferrante's refusal either to admit or hide her narcissism shifted the burden of creating meaning back to her readers who, once more, were left to mark their anxiety via the limits of their creation.

(In the meantime, I would like to read a novel about a toaster.)

2. Cute suite

> *I wanted to be both image and image maker*.
>
> Carolee Schneeman, *Elephant Magazine*[13]

> *She was like art. I mean, she was an object that had been very strongly, effectively created.*

Robert Rauschenberg, on Edie Sedgwick[14]

If, as the French philosopher Henri Bergson wrote, the mechanical encrusted on the human causes comic, then the human encrusted on the digital causes cute.

Cute is the paradigm for online appearance. Like Bergson's comic, cute relies on availability for objectification – but only some humans succeed in becoming cute objects: 'A man is not a thing,' wrote Martin Heidegger, putting the 'it' in it-girl. 'It is true that we speak of a young girl faced with a task that is too difficult for her as being a young thing, still too young for it, but only because we feel being human in a certain way is missing here.'[15]

'Technology in some way is always implicated in the feminine. It is young; it is thingly,' wrote the American thinker, Avital Ronell, in *The Telephone Book*. 'What seems to be taking shape is that which advances her as that which falls short of a task.'[16] This feminine performance of lack 'also evokes the affined Freudian complaint concerning the all too self-contained woman of narcissism: the self-sufficient pose of the somewhat auto-engendering thing'.[17] If human subjectivity is failure, then this take on girlhood as the cycling of inexperience is a failure to fail.

This can lead to *Excellences and Perfections*, which is the title of the Argentinian artist Amalia Ulman's 2014 Instagram work, a spoof on the amateur art of influencer culture, then at its height. Failure is subject to time, but a failure to fail produces a loop without feedback, an instance, a point, a thing. Or online, its internet equivalent, the SPIME, a virtual commodity, existing – as Bruce Sterling, the sci-fi author who coined that word, explains – virtually, across time and space.[18]

Lack has become a thing online too – a particularly feminised perpetual, virtual object that is simultaneously available and unavailable. The movie star Gwyneth Paltrow runs a website called Goop. Its thing is to show things, and its modus operandi could be called lack. In an article in the *New York Times Magazine*, Paltrow describes the site as a locus of lack that is also one of abundance: she 'only ever wanted to be someone who

recommended things', and the things she recommends are both lacking to her readers while being simultaneously virtually present. Paltrow said of Goop: 'It's crucial to me that we remain aspirational. Not in price point, because content is always free.'[19] But the things she recommends never come for free, either at the point of purchase or at the point of use. The sorts of objects Paltrow recommends are those that encrypt money, making it seem benevolent, harmless, cute. But she is also offering something else. What does it mean when a woman offers herself up as content to be consumed, for nothing?

Women, in particular, have been offered identity online in return for brand allegiance. Our challenge is how to convert shopping into solidarity, brand identity into class identity, given that our personal identities have so often been facilitated by allegiances to things, even if we don't check out the basket but only add its contents to Pinterest or Tumblr. When the algorithm conjures products to reappear in our feeds, we 'appear' to have chosen this life, as life online depends on choosing and appearing. Choice online appears not as something to do with economics, but as something to do with self.

Influencers like Paltrow are just 'being themselves'. It's their job. And their work online is to look as though they have no other job. All except the most successful have other jobs, but they never get a day off. If their performance of leisure is a weekend job, what do they do on Mondays? Unlike Paltrow, most influencers are amateurs, hoping to graduate to professional status. But what they perform, even once they reach this status, is amateurism: what seems to exist outside the world of work – the personal. What they hope to monetarise is that which seems unmonetised. And what they depict is usually 'the journey' – #getreadywithme, the state of being about to create – just as Roland Barthes talks about Proust's 'making of the narrator not he who has seen and felt nor even he who is writing, but he who *is going to write*'.[20]

The influencer is someone who can be seen to do nothing, or nothing that can be called any *thing*. *Maybe they go home and update their Instagrams*,

said the older male artist sitting in the café with me in Paris, watching the young girls go by. He was disgusted because, whatever he imagined they did, he could categorise it neither as work nor art.

For five months in 2014, Ulman blurred the boundaries between professional and amateur when she ran a project on her personal account, @amaliaulman, on Instagram, a platform primarily designed for personal content.[21] A contemporary *Rake's Progress* – the artist as a young influencer – Ulman incarnated as 'cute girl', then 'sugar baby', then 'life goddess' (Ulman's terms). Nora Caplan-Bricker at *Slate* headlined Ulman's art as a 'hoax' (as did many other press reports) because she did not reveal that the project was not identical with her life until it was over. But who was hoaxed? And where was the transition from life to art located? Ulman has been compared to artists who have presented role-play work in more conventional offline venues. 'The reactions of [Cindy] Sherman's audience members are tempered by their awareness that what they're seeing is art,' wrote Caplan-Bricker, but 'Ulman's pictures are highbrow provocation in a lowbrow milieu where viewers feel free to rate her'.[22]

'Rating' was not the only viewer response to Ulman's project: there was envy ('I want one'), advice ('you need to cut the poison people out of your life!'), requests for advice ('may I ask you where you get your hair coloured?'), lust ('bae yr perfect'), concern/concern trolling ('do you feel that you are a sad/trapped Lil porcelain doll?'), as well as the occasional (performatively) forthright question about exactly what Ulman is doing ('Euh please why are you filming this? Is Instagram your real life?').[23] @amaliaulman sometimes engaged with her audience as a group ('What's your favourite book?') and users responded, but she seldom replied to an individual comment – as though this were not the two-way interface of social media but the one-way street of the legacy-media personal column.[24]

Ulman's work is in line with Instagram's insistence that, for amateur creators, the artist is believed to be her material. But 'nobody can commit photography alone', as Marshall McLuhan wrote in 1964.[25] Those who see the influencer fail to see the photographer. Even in pre-Internet selfie-work,

for every Claude Cahun there was a Marcel Moore; for every Man Ray, an Alice Prin (a.k.a. Kiki de Montparnasse). Why are these works severally signed ‘Cahun’ and ‘Man Ray’? Cahun and Moore were women, as was Prin. Man Ray was male. Just as fashion models are seldom seen as the ‘creators’ of their works, and are often not even credited on the pages of glossy magazines alongside the stylist and photographer, when the subject of a photograph is female, her creative work is often credited to the photographer. Unless the photographer is female too.

Instagram reversed this: for the first time, the person in the photo is assumed to be the creator. The anon who came to be termed the Instagram boyfriend – or whoever takes the apparently spontaneous lifestyle shots – is, literally, out of the picture. And if the creator is also the photographer, the visible gesture of photographing yourself has also become a thing. The back of the phone aimed at the mirror, always hiding a part of the photographer’s body or face, showing the regard of regarding your regard. Ulman ‘takes’ selfies in situations where she could not photograph herself – while meditating – a neat joke.[26]

Ulman shoots her own body, which, for women, has so often been the site of other people’s art. Probing the split between artist/model, someone posted on Ulman’s account: ‘Do u have an Instagram butler?’[27] An influencer’s world (which must not be sullied by the presence of less attractive friends or lovers) is a public depiction of the private, of bathrooms, bedrooms, shop changing rooms. Ulman’s focus is sensual: bedsheets, flowers, her own body, which is the same pale tone as the petals, the pillowcase, her clothes. She exists in outfits that can only be exposed indoors (‘#new #undies’, ‘lov my loungewear’).[28] But what Barthes calls the ‘invisibility’ of the photograph – as well as the selfie’s status as an amateur form – mean that Ulman is not often thought of as a photographer.[29] This is reinforced by Ulman’s use of amateur media: a phone, not a professional camera; Instagram, not an art gallery. This deliberate confusion is not limited to artists: many ‘selfies’ by professional Instagrammers are professionally shot. The ambiguity in distinguishing the

creator from the creation can be a confusion deliberately generated by the worker who's not letting on that they own the means of production.

The point at which Ulman's art becomes commodifiable is her image. 'The cult of the star', Walter Benjamin wrote of the film industry of the 1930s, 'preserves not the unique aura of the person but the "spell of the personality," the phony spell of a commodity.' The person who inhabits this off-screen role is as alienated from their image 'as any article made in a factory'. But if 'film responds to film's shriveling of the aura' of IRL presence 'with an artificial build-up of "personality" outside the studio', then the influencer's personality is hermetic.[30] There is no 'outside the studio'. The influencer never leaves the site of her self-creation.

Ulman's photos remain her artworks, but their diaristic real-time exhibition also makes *Excellences and Perfections* a live, body-focused piece of performance art, a virtual inheritor of Marina Abramovic's *Rhythm 0* (1974) or Yoko Ono's *Cut Piece* (1964), both performances that invited the audience to act upon the artist's body.[31]

Like Ono and Abramovic, when Ulman presented herself as vulnerable, she drew not sympathy but aggression. But, unlike them, it is her virtual avatar, @amaliaulman, who suffers. Ulman can retire from her pursuit, as Abramovic and Ono could not.

The difference between Ulman's and Ono/Abramovic's works is the presence of the screen as a protector from, but also as a projection for, this violence. But a deliberate engagement with suffering as the flipside of online appearance makes Ulman's feed different to those of most IRL lifestyle Instagrammers. This doubling is trebled by the (post-project) knowledge that during the making of *Excellences and Perfections* the artist was injured in a bus crash, 'damaging my legs and sending me to hospital for two months,' which made, she wrote, some of the shoots 'all the more funny': the terrible joke of appearing 'perfect' onscreen but still having a body in the off hours.[32]

Like comedy, cute relies on the suggestion of bodily vulnerability; but where comedy pratfalls expose the human in its failure to be mechanical,

cute things just get more thing-like. It might be impossible to hurt a ‘porcelain doll’ or a persona created for an art project. But what about the IRL influencers, most of whom are necessarily aware of the difference between the life they portray and what they do to depict it? They line up with Sianne Ngai’s ‘zany’ worker, whose zaniness is also about becoming-machine, and is also all about personal risk: ‘What is most essential to zaniness is its way of evoking a situation with the potential to cause harm or injury – a feeling that could not exist without some reference, however implicit, to a being to whom that harm or injury might befall.’[33] Caplan-Bricker reported: ‘Ulman faked a boob job and a breakdown for her second storyline, which was inspired by Kim Kardashian.’[34] Though @amaliaulman took physical risks, some of which Ulman shared, the artist engaged in an area of professional risk that her avatar did not. The hate @amaliaulman received was parallelled by the critical hate Ulman received as an artist for her apparent closeness to the character she played. If her object, as an artist, was admiration in the form of critical acclaim, this seems a bold trajectory – but only if we completely identify the artist with her work.

‘Feminisation’ is a term that has been used of jobs where the personal becomes crucial to the work. When that work is representation, and ‘the representations that do exist are normative phantasms’, as Judith Butler wrote in their 1994 paper about the frictions between feminism and queer theory, ‘Against Proper Objects’, ‘then how are we to reverse or contest the force of those representations?’

Butler summarises the history of feminist representation as a perpetual struggle to represent ‘real women’ in the context of the *Excellences and Perfections* of a cultural ideal that necessarily excludes them, while being their only representative recourse. Similarly, Ulman uses her IRL body to play with the border between representation and reality in Instagram culture. Ulman ‘really’ took pole dancing lessons, and perhaps IRL followed the strict diet designed – another ‘hoax’ – as a work of art in itself, by fellow artist Nina Cristante, whom @amaliaulman described as ‘my

nutritionist'.[35] Like Instagram, the art establishment didn't always respond positively to the confusion generated by an artist whose body was also her work: 'Suddenly I was this dumb b—,' Ulman complained, 'because I was showing my ass in pictures.'[36]

Ulman was by no means the first artist to use the net to create a durational persona that crossed into meatspace. Marisa Olson, the artist and critic, coined the term 'postinternet art' in 2006, defining it in her 2011 essay, 'Postinternet: Art After the Internet' as work that is not necessarily located online but takes for granted its joint citizenship with the net. In 2004 she created a three-month identity project exhibited as a 'training blog' for the run-up to her audition for the IRL reality TV show *American Idol*. Olson's critique was an attack on (returning to Benjamin) the aestheticisation of politics, as well as the politics of female beauty, and on politics as a beauty contest. Olson's blog followed the pattern of state elections, allowing readers to vote for her audition outfit and choice of song while political candidates were paraded at the primaries, and she often compared the two processes: 'Good morning, internet users. Did everyone watch the debates last night? Is everyone fired up to vote? The more time I spend thinking about American Idol, the more I think about voting . . .'[37]

A professional artist and former punk singer, Olson used the old backstory of the amateur's desire to transition to pro status, expressed via the amateur aesthetic interface of blogs. 'The massive attention drawn to my blog by the *New York Times*, MSNBC, Yahoo, and Rhizome.org (not to mention other bloggers!)' served the double function of drawing attention to her work as an artist. The exhibition space for her piece was not a gallery, but blogs.com, and her performance of the kinds of engagement an ambitious amateur seeks from professional media was embedded in some of the tropes of those media, in ways that *Excellences and Perfections* is not, revealing an earlier net that relied more heavily on imitations of forms outside itself. Olson's 'training blog' included 'behind-the-scenes' photos: a performance of what happens in the run-up to a professional performance

that never transpired (she was not selected for the show). Instagram is all behind the scenes. There is nothing to 'reveal'.

If Olson's work was a critique of the standards for female beauty, taken from media that dictated them externally, then, due to Instagram's self-producing mechanism, Ulman's work is more engaged with the process of what it critiques, so that that critique sometimes appears ambiguous. In *Excellences and Perfections*, @amaliaulman (the character) spends time at an all-female new-age retreat where Kristeva's 'women's time' merges with 'me-time'. Ulman's avatar reports finding older women beautiful for the first time there, because 'they don't live by the constant menace of the male gaze'. @amaliaulman begins to find older 'women from the outside world' ugly: 'Their faces shine too much. And worst of all, worse than all the weird accessories, and surgeries and hair dye, are their infantilised manners: they fulfil the cliche of the stupid middle-aged woman.'[38] Ulman's avatar does not find these behaviours repulsive in women who successfully inhabit feminine cultural ideals, and on the same page describes a meeting with an older man without mentioning his appearance at all.

Because of the structure of Instagram as influence, it can be difficult to remember that Ulman is role-playing. The reactions *Excellences and Perfections* generates rely on the knowledge that one of the things an influencer does is to provide a model. 'Model' is a word for a thing: a likeness made to scale, but also a 'perfect model' worthy of imitation. It is also a word for a job that is mostly done by women, which is mostly about performances of femininity. There are male models, but they need the prefix.

'Flaunt' is a word I come across a lot onscreen. It seems to mean *any woman appearing in a photograph*. But Instagrammers don't exactly 'flaunt'. The most successful don't quite do the same thing as professional models. Their implied unprofessional status means that they seem to be better versions of ourselves; or rather, they convince us that the gap between us and them is one we could almost cross. Unlike models, they are

condemned not to look different in every shoot but never to be different from themselves.

Ulman's selfies tune into the influencer's provocation of a double sense of self in the viewer: aspirational identification, twinned with inferiority. But this sense of divided self affects social media's creators too: 'I think I am a writer and an actor and an artist,' wrote Tavi Gevison, a teen fashion influencer of the 2000s turned magazine publisher and more, 'but I haven't believed the purity of my own intentions ever since I became my own salesperson too . . . I almost envy my own life as though it were someone else's.'[39]

Taffy Brodesser-Akner, who wrote the *NYT Magazine* piece on Goop, writes that Paltrow is 'the only one who can't see herself clearly. All she knows is what she hears, and she once heard that she eats in front of the mirror naked.'[40] The subject that is @amaliaulman is generated by the knowledge of being seen via the gaze of an other: not caught in the act that prompts judgement (Sartre) or a disjunct (Lacan), but the push-pull of identification>envy>emulation>differentiation that Sianne Ngai outlines as the terms of feminised but also feminist engagement.

Envy, Ngai writes, is a productive relation, but only if understood to be political. It is rational to envy capitalism's winners (including its gender-winners) because this prompts us to notice the structural reasons they have something we don't. Brodesser-Akner, noting the difference between Paltrow's life and her own, writes that 'aspiration is always infused with a kind of suffering'.[41] She may feel the painful pull of aspiring to Paltrow's 'things', but it's the pull between identification and envy that enables Brodesser-Akner herself to 'see herself clearly'. The selfie that is produced via Paltrow's image is Brodesser-Akner's own.

A post on @amaliaulman's account:

> LA cool day for som fashion blog.. Good memories
> Lmao that bitch hatin, so nuch envy in her eyes im dyin[42]

Ulman has developed a model for her art that relies on her successfully modelling what she critiques. This is not the same kind of critique Ulman could make if she were an old girl, or a fat girl, or not a girl at all. It would not mean the same if she could not appear able-bodied, or if she were young but not beautiful, or beautiful but not young. As someone who (like most women) cannot use this kind of self-representation to critique the 'force of those representations', if I engage respectfully with Ulman's critique of beauty through art and art through beauty, her success in both areas may make me doubly envious. But perhaps this is not the kind of engagement Ulman is asking for.

Could an 'un-becoming' woman – a 'bad model' like me – take the same joke, and run with it? The body-positive movement has been big on Instagram, and it creates acceptance – so long as its participants agree to capitalism's terms and conditions of visibility as consumption. BeReal, the app for spontaneous selfies, was founded in 2020 as a reaction to Instagram's staged aesthetic. De-influencers make a career out of recommending *not* buying things. But both still rely on the structure of influence and the commodified self in selfie.

Can the envy @amaliaulman produces be productive? Or is Ngai's demand that even 'ugly feelings' be productive all too demanding? Ulman's art does not feel productive – and its refusal to take the open critical stance that has become expected of feminist art is annoyingly persistent. Replacing the 'shock of the new', the annoyance of the cute produces ugly feelings that it does not resolve. It is shocking in its refusal to shock. It feels not only too much *like* what it portrays; it also feels like the portrayal of a commodified existence in an art world that often works quite a lot like Instagram, relying on the personal glamour of the artist.

Some artworks are indistinguishable from adverts, which is perhaps why Ulman does not refuse this structure. She does not transgress it; she does not transcend it. She inhabits it. Refusing to leave the scene of the crime, what if Ulman's art is to *almost* critique? What if pausing, undecided, in

continuing to *take* the joke, to allow the joke to *take place*, is one of the moves available to feminist art now?

3. DEAD SITES

The thing about everyone is that almost everyone is already dead – almost everyone you've read about anyway. There are so many women dying right now, more than ever before. In the past, women didn't die because so few of them had lives that were what Jacques Derrida called 'structurally readable'. 'Writing that is not structurally readable – iterable – beyond the death of the addressee would not be writing,' he wrote. 'The "death" or the possibility of the "death" of the receiver [is] inscribed in the structure of the mark.'[43] But – Barbara Hammer, Carolee Schneeman, Agnes Varda . . . We know about them because their lives were screened. We must learn how to die onscreen as well as how to live.

My first screen death – I mean the first death I learned about onscreen that really hit home – was Chantal Akerman's, in 2015. And thinking again about her best-known movie, *Jeanne Dielman, 23 quai du Commerce, Bruxelles 1080*, reminds me of Martha Rosler's 1975 screen piece S*emiotics of the Kitchen*, in which the artist presented an A to Z of domestic implements, using them, like Akerman's heroine, with what might be considered an unusual degree of aggression. Which reminds me of French psychologist Jacques Lacan's interest in the case of the Papin sisters, who killed their abusive employer, along with her daughter, with domestic utensils, after being berated for not finishing the ironing during a power cut.[44] Which hyperlinks to Elma Mitchell's poem, 'Thoughts After Ruskin', about how housewives, whose work seems so meek, kill spiders. I haven't looked at the collection it comes from for years, because when I was given the book, I didn't really want to be given a book about housewives.

I'd thought the poem was by Julia Darling, who wrote most of the poems in the collection, along with the group she founded, the Poetry Virgins. A friend I don't know any more, then a young male postgrad, bought me the

collection when we were both in our twenties. He liked the suggestive title of the book, which was *Sauce.* He liked Darling's suggestive name, and the group's name: Poetry Virgins. He cooked for one (himself). I already cooked for a family. I don't think he'd read the book. I think he thought it was mostly about sex, which some of it was, but a lot of it was also about other things: 'This is not domesticated poetry,' wrote the poet U. A. Fanthorpe in her introduction to the collection, 'because it is about hoovers.'[45]

(Lacan, writing on the Papin sisters, said their action took place in the gap of what was not said.)

I always wondered how the lesbian Julia Darling felt about her suggestive name, which so camply evokes some kind of heteronormativity: the domestic twinned with the sexual – or whether their interplay of meaning with her own life produced meaning via what Jacques Derrida called *différance.* Darling's name is also the title of that 1960s movie about a disillusioned model and screen star, played by Julie Christie, whose alienated use of (hetero)sexuality as a social-climbing strategy produces a gender melancholy that creates the possibility of critique. I'm wondering if the Poetry Virgins titled their collection as a strategy to make it more appetising: part-wooing, part mocking its implied reader, who might have welcomed the suggestion of a bit of *Sauce* on the side. And I'm wondering about whether suggestion was Darling's strategy.

Strategies of suggestion and suggestiveness imply suggestibility. To suggest is an alternative to saying, and also to the 'gap of what is not said'. It might have been less easy for the Papin sisters to pass to the act of stabbing someone over a suggestion, or over what was not suggested. I've certainly used sexual suggestiveness as a strategy in my own work both as a mode to which – like the domestic – I have been granted access, and as a strategy to attract the attention of people who might think the domesticity I have written about is mostly about hoovers.

There is a dead site for the Poetry Virgins' book. So sad. It still asks the reader to send a cheque for £2 (including £1 postage) to receive a copy of the book: mid-nineties prices! At the bottom of the page, a message from a dead site: 'An error occurred while processing this directive'. I'd like to send a material, physical cheque into the ether of the internet, just to see what happens. I'd like to try to push it through the screen.

Darling died of cancer in 2005, an experience she described in her early blog – a silent onscreen voice, still 'live' – as simultaneously bodied and disembodied.[46]

Darling was a British movie that looked to Europe: made in gritty black and white, in imitation of the French films of the *Nouvelle Vague*. Concerned with glamour, its heroine, like those of Godard's films, is an everyday superstar. That Darling (Christie) was working class made her a desirable commodity: she can be bought yet retains, through her labour of *différance*, a suffering that makes her success as a commodity acceptable, just as (Julia) Darling's *différance* came from her move from heterosexuality, while holding onto the domestic. *Darling*'s glamour comes from the fact that she cannot enjoy the glitter she promotes. *Darling*'s (I mean Julie Christie's character's) face is constantly cracking up in laughter or tears. Her movements are sudden; they break the skin of the calm-faced screen beauty which is her character's work. There's a tension (if you pay attention) between Christie's work and the roles she – *Darling* (the character) – plays for work. It's a tension between motion and stillness. What I find moving about models is their frozen gestures; and also their anonymity, which is to do with their not speaking.

'Why is it that cancer makes one look so weird?' Julia Darling continues on her blog, never quite getting her 'I' in. 'I think it's a philosophical thing . . . we have crossed the line of beauty and only people that love us can still see it.'[47]

The cosiness of (Julia) Darling's blog sometimes frightens me: her repetition (in the French sense of rehearsal) of domestic objects and processes on loop – 'I want everyone to take up knitting and eat porridge

and ride a bike'; and her staged excitement over travelling on the same train as 'her maj' ('Fancy!') are expressions of camp that just . . . aren't quite my cup of tea.[48] I'm trying to pay attention to how these frivolities can make a *différance*, but I can't help noticing how camp citation can also legitimise the constraining boundaries that modulate it. I do not find the cosy comfortable, and I'm not sure I'd have liked Darling (Julia) – but then again, perhaps I would.

You can replay Darling's diary on loop (she describes herself as 'loopy' with cancer, as though repetition were a kind of erasure) via the oddly anti-linear narrative of a blog. She ends where you begin, at her deathplace. To reverse her decline, you scroll to the base of the page and hit, 'NEXT'.

Next – as onscreen I can hyperlink, or just close a tab – I'm listening to Barbara Hammer on YouTube giving a 'performative lecture' on the art of dying.[49] The director, famous for her open *Dyketactics*, talks about 'coming out as being ill', and says that, 'the art of dying is the same as the art of living', because 'the pain of living in these times of inhumanity requiring resistance, marching, demonstration, can be relieved by making art'. Art may be a useful strategy, she says, 'but it does not treat the basis of the pain'.

Hammer crosses into her audience. A woman who looks the same age as her reaches out when Hammer's back is turned, and touches her lightly, or tries to, or reaches out and doesn't touch her and withdraws her hand quickly as if from an electric shock. The bodies in the clips of *Dyketactics* that Hammer shows are mostly young and white and able. And I look at them with a look that is like the question: *What do dykes do in bed?* But it's not that question, which is a question I don't have to ask. But it is a question with a similar degree of tautologous incredulity, which I still find myself asking all the time: *What* do *women look like?* Women onscreen, their bodies, I mean, when they are not looking at themselves as they have been taught to. And I, being white and able though not so young as the women in the film when they were filmed, but not so old as Hammer in her last lecture either, am able, perhaps, to see something of myself in them. This is

where looking at women's bodies is a strategy, not in the usual way of judging and sorting. 'I want you to become aware of your physical body,' says Hammer, 'through watching this film.'

'This work was made' Hammer, says, 'from the sense of touch.' And its auto-amputated sensation that invites me to complete the script seems clear enough to me. Though *Dyketactics*, Hammer says, was 'labelled pornographic', it's not, she says, 'sensational, like a rock show', though it might be that too.

Auto-amputation's *différance* continues in Hammer's work: the sound in *Sync Touch* is lip-unsynched. In *Sanctus*, which sees right through the body with x-rays, the sound is omitted, as it is in the clips she screens from *A Horse Is Not a Metaphor*. In *Vital Signs* (2009) the non-diegetic hospital sound is alarming – literally . . . What did she call it – 'anxiety'? 'Sometimes there's pain in creating,' she says, 'and it's not something to avoid.'

'One of the things I have done', says Hammer, 'is to break the pattern of work. Not to repeat myself as my films have gone on, or my paintings or installations.' If successful art is repetition, and if the art of an online self is repetition, Hammer's repetition lies in breaking. She breaks her condition too: 'People talk about cancer through truisms, and what they've heard others say.' I guess cancer terminology is (to use a metaphor that is not a horse) itself mutational, not like repetition-as-rehearsal, but like some form of repetitious work. 'Cancer is work', wrote the American poet, Anne Boyer, in 'Woman Sitting at the Machine', 'But work is work too.'[50]

'Sickness is defined under capitalism', wrote David Harvey, in *Spaces of Hope*, 'as inability to work.'[51] But you can work at sickness if your work is writing. In her online diary Julia Darling wrote: 'I have such a work ethic that I find it impossible not to feel bad about doing my job properly.'[52] No longer able to write, she was 'thinking of knitting a novel', but her flesh congealed until her limbs resembled 'something left after a chicken dinner'.[53] Like Boyer, in her own account of cancer treatment, Darling is a worker, working at her illness. As it consumes her, her job is also to be a

consumer (of drugs, of resources, of care). Luckily for her, and unluckily for Boyer, Darling's treatment was the work of the state.

(The elder Papin sister, Christine, believed to have instigated the murder of her employer, starved herself to death in prison. The younger, Léa, is reported to have worked as a hotel maid after serving an eight-year sentence. The film director Claude Ventura claimed to have met, in 2001, shortly before her death, a woman he believed to be Léa Papin, but she could no longer speak.)

'I want to say hello to all the people watching online,' Hammer says, and, yes, though Hammer is now dead and can't say anything anymore, and though she never knew my address, not even my IP address, she is also addressing me. 'I love you with all my heart,' she says, to 'my spouse'. (Should anyone ever say such a thing in public, especially onscreen where it can be replayed and replayed, the thousandth time as farce?) 'And . . . I *love* all of you!', she concludes, diluting the moment to a talk show boast, before inviting each and every guest for prosecco. OK, this may look like a narcissistic gesture – but it's narcissism at its best, the kind of narcissism a woman might have to engage with, in order to make art.

2020: Wikidentities

At the table across the café from me, a guy is wearing a t-shirt that says ‘Fuark Aesthetic’. I have no idea what this means, except that the aesthetic of laying claim to an aesthetic is now a thing. I don’t think he would have been wearing this shirt five years ago – definitely not ten. Aesthetic used to be an experience. Now it’s a look.

Like vaporwave, like the New Aesthetic, online aesthetics are, to quote James Bridle, ‘simply, “what it looks like” ’. Though this looking like is not so simple. The guy’s t-shirt didn’t embody an aesthetic as a look, so much as evoke its possibility in words. Aesthetic is a word, like ‘kind of’, or ‘like’, and it’s related to liking online, a.k.a. having aesthetic judgement. The net has changed ‘aesthetic’ from an adjective to a noun. But it’s not a noun that describes a concrete object. Net aesthetics are both an instance and a process in which the performative ‘sense of something’ (Lauren Berlant), via virtual instances, replaces direct engagement with a physical object or live experience. For instance, the cottagecore aesthetic doesn’t rely on possessing or using any particular object but on manipulating the vibe they conjure. And you don’t have to read Aristotle to be part of dark academia but you do have to be able to sort and display images that make it look like you might.

Both these aesthetics are part of Aesthetics Wiki, an encyclopaedic website where, as with rule 34 for porn, if you can think of it, there’s an aesthetic of it.[1] A networked information system made from Wikipedia’s open-source code, it is hosted by the paysite Fandom, which invites: ‘Search for a wiki or start your own.’ Its encyclopaedic style and structure gives the virtual the stamp of the real. Run by fans – amateurs, in the

French sense of enthusiasts – the business of Aesthetics Wiki is to describe, tweak and expand a proposed aesthetic.

Taking part is all about the aestheticiness of an aesthetic. Aesthetics Wiki is obsessed not only with rules but with its own obsession with rules. Rule-making, and not the rules themselves, is the core of -core. Who makes the rule that there should be rules is less clear. ‘Whoever added back those cat pictures that originally came from Grey Academia needs to stop,’ moderator SweetcrispyJesus commented on the Petcore Aesthetic page in November 2020. ‘They were intended for Grey Academia and the owner of the photographs does not want them on the petcore page.’

Though the wiki hosts more traditional pages for fans of IRL screen and music stars, films and books, at its core, Aesthetics Wiki is not personality but concept-centred. The balance of being a fan has shifted. Devoid of star focus, these communal pages are all about being groupies without a group. The wiki itself tells me that core comes from *coeur*, the French for heart, rather than core like the centre of a fruit – essential to the plant’s reproduction but also what’s left as waste after it’s been consumed.

Since the Industrial Revolution, consumer aesthetics have held out the readymade promise not only of individual fulfilment but of the fulfilment of individuality, in a world where personal identity has been claimed as a power and a privilege. ‘The personality is the bearer of the cultural ideal,’ wrote Herbert Marcuse in 1972. ‘Personality’ seems personal, the opposite of the readymade, ‘supposed to represent happiness in the form in which this culture proclaims it as the highest good: private harmony amidst general anarchy, joyful activity amidst bitter labor’.[2]

The relation of the personal to labour is a twentieth-century problem only sharpened in the twenty-first by platforms that demand payment in personality. ‘Personality’, wrote Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer of ‘The Culture Industry’ of 1944, has become appearance. It ‘scarcely signifies anything more than shining white teeth and freedom from body odour and emotions’.[3] Though in 1944 indoor bathrooms were far from standard and accessible dentistry was something even fully non-automated

communists might have enjoyed, ‘projects designed to perpetuate the individual as autonomous units,’ they insisted, ‘make him all the more subservient to his adversary – the total power of capital’.[4] Consumer choice was not an expression of personality but constructed it: ‘Marked differentiations such as those of A and B films, or of stories in magazines in different price ranges, depend not so much on subject matter as on classifying, organising, and labelling consumers.’[5]

As on Aesthetics Wiki, ‘something is provided for all so that none may escape; the distinctions are emphasised and extended’. But pre-internet, this power of sorting and assigning identity via products was purely in the control of the producers: ‘There is nothing left for the consumer to classify. Producers have done it for him.’ While A&H site consumer aesthetics as a locus of repression, this also suggests the possibility that they might also serve as an area of struggle over the assignment, control and use of identities.

But what kind of time is this to be dabbling in aesthetics? Now the resurgence of fascism in Europe and the US has been named, is there any wonder I’m returning to the Frankfurt School: Adorno, Horkheimer, Marcuse and, yes, Benjamin, all appallingly aware of the links between aesthetics and – not only biopolitical but necropolitical – repression. ‘Fascism tends towards an aestheticization of politics’, wrote Benjamin in an often-quoted footnote to ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’, whereas ‘Communism responds by politicizing art’. But wait, the full Benjamin quote goes on like this:

> Fascism sees its salvation in giving these masses not their right, but instead a chance to express themselves. The masses have a right to change property relations; Fascism seeks to give them an expression while preserving property.[6]

It would be easy to feel that the identities offered by core aesthetics preserve property because they lean towards the performance of practices of

aesthetic consumption: reading rather than writing; eating rather than cooking; marketing rather than growing. Even when they involve creation, an important aspect is using aesthetically correct equipment and settings, whose decorative aspects tag these activities ‘femme’. Why aren’t these people influencers on Instagram? Because these activities are almost always entirely virtual.

Aesthetics Wiki fandoms transform objects into concepts or practices, creating a much more interesting situation than that of a live influencer using physical goods in an offline location. Refusing objects as physical property, the non-consumers of Aesthetics Wiki keep on sorting and re-sorting their virtual avatars, marking their practice as a site of non-consumption. If the opposite of being an influencer is being influenced, in the age of identity capital, fandom begins to look like a radical act.

Fandoms on Aesthetics Wiki are not predicated on buying or owning the stuff they aestheticise virtually, and they’re much less brand-oriented than even very recent online identities that answered a similar desire for community. For example, 2019’s always on-brand VSCO girls, whose colourful, bland style demanded offline, brand-oriented expression. Nor do Aesthetics Wiki users tend to fangirl individual creators as ‘brands’. What Aesthetics Wiki values is creative-critical engagement, less often with individual works or authors than with genres.

Academias are some of the most popular fandom cores, and they have prolific iterations: as well as dark, there’s grey, pastel, light and a whole lot more. Cores overlap. One core produces another. Like other cores, membership of academia aesthetics isn’t based on access to real-life practice, but the pursuit of a style. Books are listed as ‘inspirations’ (for the look, the mood). Even if, as one comment states, you ‘hate reading’, you can still participate in the vibe. Academia cores may be both popular and relatable because the core age for fans is eighteen to twenty-four.

‘Romanticise study sessions’ (‘POV you romanticise everything’) advises the website of UK core-focused fashion brand Minga, which organises its products under headings including ‘grungecore’ and

‘fairycore’. The largely school and college-age mods on Aesthetics Wiki need this romanticisation as a veneer on contemporary third-level education. Not only do they know that most of them will never attend one of the Ivy League or Oxbridge colleges scrapbooked in their feeds, but they’re also aware that the social and financial mobility promised by education in the late-twentieth century has become severely eroded as well as ruinously expensive. But while academia cores romanticise an old-skool, rule-bound image of academia, they are also para-academic venues that function as lively forums for critique.

This critique is superficially easy to dismiss as it does not look like analysis but practice. Academias are more likely to remove cultural texts deemed too scholarly than politically troubling. ‘Philosophy, in the context of one for an aesthetic’, the Wiki decrees,

> is the social perspective shared by members participating in an aesthetic. It connects to the general attitude of the community, a shared combination of personality traits, and experiences . . . This branch does influence philosophies in aesthetics (internet communities, not the study of beauty) but is not studied in rigor by members of aesthetic communities.

Aesthetics Wiki’s lack of ‘rigor’ *is* its methodology, something that allows interplay and overlap across the aesthetic network. Blending is key: ‘The process of blending aesthetics can include combining aesthetics that are very similar in their descriptions, or very different, sometimes opposite philosophies and imagery,’ says the wiki. Fandom aesthetics are imbued less with discrete values than with the single structural value of flexibility, allowing images, texts and other works to be stripped of their original uses and values and reworked. The purpose of a reference is no longer (as in agitprop art) to speak clearly of one thing but to provide a locus for a range of meanings. We are in the age of the anti-logo.

Wiki aesthetics in the age of digital reproduction is a practice of citation, relying on repetition and reiteration to consolidate aesthetic power. Scrapbooking is perhaps its pre-internet paradigm – especially impersonal scrapbooking that allowed sentiment to collect around commercially produced scrap showing pasteable petticoated children, bow-tied dogs, bouquets and cakes. Aesthetic fandom identities use remade material to pull away from the personal, even as they define a core. A scrapbook is not a photo album; the images are not personal. Aesthetics Wiki acknowledges the scrappiness of identity, its horizontal values, the interdependence of the individual with other individuals, groups and nested cultures. On Aesthetics Wiki, scrap, from being peripheral, becomes central.

Aesthetics Wiki's combinations of virtual commercial scraps – screenshots, gifs made from movies, Netflix and fashion mags – are not the same kind of art made from scrap in the twentieth century. This is not bricolage or Arte Povera, or the collages of Dada or punk. The scraps are not made into something else but juxtaposed non-hierarchically in networked spaces that afford room for participation by a wider range of aestheticians – users who don't have the money, training or connections to be IRL curators or collectors. What is interesting about Aesthetics Wiki is often not what is happening at the level of the individual creation, but at the level of the network.

But unlike avant-garde art networks of the twentieth century, this structure of horizontal networked participation does not guarantee any particular political affiliation. Encyclopedia Dramatica is a wiki that, though it also relies on aesthetic sorting and categorising by amateurs, is very far from Aesthetics Wiki's largely liberal vibe. Founded close to the hot beginning of Web 2.0 in 2006, the jointly owned alt-right website was named a 'troll archive' by the *New York Times*. The structure of both wikis guarantees participation via action, which intensifies the political affiliations of each. This is because membership of both wikis is necessarily performative and involves declaring judgements in public. As on Aesthetics Wiki, no member of Encyclopedia Dramatica can demonstrate their

membership of the group unless they do what the wiki is known for: demonstrably troll.

Even internally, wiki core aesthetics are host to clashing ideologies. Cottagecore is popular with both lesbians and tradwives; it's 'as if Neo Soviets and Anarcho Capitalists found a shared aesthetic', one fan commented.[7] What allows the wiki structure to accommodate opposing political groups is an online practice used across the amateur net: tagging. This linking of images to a range of concepts via descriptions added by individual users – crucially not at the point of publication but across the life of an image – is necessarily communal and amateur. The practice was termed 'folksonomy' by self-styled 'information architect' Thomas Vander Wal in 2004. Users apply public tags to online items, developing a folk taxonomy with no dictating ethos, depending on a build-up of similar tags. This group or collaborative tagging involves something called 'radical trust', a faith in the good faith (and expertise) of users, which was used to build – and continues to maintain – crowd-sourced websites, including IMDb and Wikipedia. On large-scale amateur-tagged sites, facts can be checked, moderated and corrected. On Aesthetics Wiki, something more nebulous is at stake: aesthetic judgement.

Aesthetics Wikis are scrapbooked communally. The standards of aesthetic quality are no longer how individual a work is, but how refined it is by the group. 'Please do not create entries of your own aesthetic blend without mod permission,' the Aesthetics Wiki mods ask, as 'different interpretations can create millions of "unique" aesthetics that actually have little variation from pre-established aesthetics. Quality is also smaller compared to aesthetics that came from a tight-knit community, rather than a single person.'[8]

Adorno and Horkheimer favoured individual over group aesthetics, associating individuality with originality, in opposition to what they call 'interchangeable . . . detail'. But the fandoms on Aesthetics Wiki are more like Benjamin's description of folk art, which 'passes certain themes from hand to hand, like batons, behind the back of what is known as great art'.[9]

Folk artworks are patchworked like Instagram squares, or what twentieth-century Russian folklorist Vladimir Propp called the jigsawed narrative 'functions' that make up fairytale and myth.

Benjamin's 'folk' were not interested in being individual in a modernist sense. They did not express identity by manipulating their material in a way that marked their practice as avant-garde or personally distinct, but by entering into its structures. 'Folk art incorporates the human being within itself,' whereas 'art teaches us to look into objects. Folk art and kitsch allow us to look outward from within objects.' Much like Aesthetics Wiki, both facilitate identities from which 'we emerge from unconsciously experienced moments and situations that have now, at long last, been recuperated'. In folk art, aesthetic creation, as well as reception, is a fan experience. Benjamin's folk art invites the creator or receiver of the work to 'throw the situation that is imagined here around one's shoulders, like a favorite old coat'.[10] The clothing metaphor is an apt one for fashion-focused Aesthetics Wiki, as is the cosy vibe. Unlike the challenge of modernism, folk art appeals to something outside, or beyond, aesthetic judgement.

Aesthetics Wiki may not quite count as Benjamin's folk art because there is no element of craft. The images, the quotes, are pre-made. They are what Benjamin called – and Adorno condemned as – kitsch. Adorno describes the *production* of kitsch as art that has been alienated, commodified; but he does not describe its uses. When Benjamin talks about folk art, he only hints at kitsch.

What Benjamin called folk art is what Web 2.0 renamed remix culture. Remix is what, online, is called 'ReadWrite': open-source material that can be reused and altered to create new work. On the surface, kitsch is 'read only', and this may be true of its earlier iterations but, online, amateurs remix manufactured cultural products, reworking what has already been worked-on.

This is an extravagant and 'wasteful' process, in the best sense of the word, because it destroys the value of the industrial-cultural original by adding value where no value can be recouped. It makes odd pockets of

value in works that have already been recuperated. Its process is to convert ‘valuable’ cultural goods – whether material, like a dress, or immaterial, like the screening of a copyrighted movie – into flexibly valuable circulating images that are the basis of pick-n-mix online identities.

Refusing the separation between production and reproduction, original and remix, online it is possible to *be* anything, or several things simultaneously or alternately, producing a kind of surplus of (impersonal) identity. Chosen online identities also embed social media’s promise of disappearing, of deleting your account, of having an alt, of not continuing, at least online, to be that thing your offline circumstances dictate.

Pre-internet, political identities were often judged according to scale, valued by the proportion of people who could adhere to them. More complex or unusual identities were literally marginalised. Aesthetics has always worked differently, but with parallel constraints offline. Critically significant aesthetic movements of the twentieth century, say Surrealism or Lettrism, that gained influence over time, were bound initially by their place of origin and by top-down modes of dissemination (films, broadcasts, books). They had few original participants, and their subsequent impact has been enabled by structures that have been largely inaccessible to most people outside universities and urban art capitals. Conversely, the net has a capacity to sustain identities that have been called niche, regardless of the size of their audience, as well as allowing the growth of rhizomatic networks of solidarities that do not depend on establishment structures. This is even encouraged by platforms, for profit.

For this reason, elective online identity has a bad rep, predicated as it can seem on consumer choice and a liquidity that fits well with the techno-capitalist worldview. To people with stable, accepted offline identities, an invitation to identify online can seem no more than data capture. But offline, identity is only free to those who can afford it and can be very expensive for those that can’t. An indifference to identity is something powerful groups take for granted and those without power struggle with, as it is often at the forefront of everyday interactions. The more marginalised

your identity, the greater the pressure to ‘represent’ – to situate and define your identity – in order to claim a platform.

How can Aesthetics Wiki mess with this, especially given that the traditional function of an encyclopaedia is to create boundaried categories? Perhaps the messiness is key. The disposability of core aesthetics may not be a negative but a positive. The elective identities of Aesthetics Wiki might not be a constructive practice, but they are a de-constructive practice, a form of José Esteban Muñoz’s *Disidentifications*. His study described queer explorations of hegemonic aesthetic forms by artists of colour, using a range of impure materials that – instead of seeking first to dismantle the master’s house – started by building within it and, because it built using found material, could not help dismantling something.

Wikidentities challenge by their ‘weak’ coherence as borrowed, aesthetic and elective. Subject to change, taken on the basis of admiration, desire, aspiration, identification and aesthetic choice, they line up with what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick called ‘weak theory’, described by Kathleen Stewart as: ‘Theory that comes unstuck from its own line of thought to follow the objects it encounters, or becomes undone by its attention to things that don’t just *add up* but take on a life of their own as problems for thought.’[11]

The process of self-identification in Aesthetics Wiki is necessarily identity-in-progress, as it is defined by the fairytale act of self-transformation, which is why so many aesthetics focus on genres labelled ‘young adult’. It’s because they’re genre that these tropes are malleable; it’s because they are cardboard cut-outs that they can be queered. But this is also where areas of tension exist.

Dark academia, in particular, is uncomfortably aware of the problems of pursuing a retro aesthetic via images and narratives associated with retro attitudes to sex, gender, class, appearance, ability and race, and that often glamorise suicide, self-destructive practices, bullying and hazing. Young women, queer and non-binary people are the driving force behind so many Aesthetics Wiki fandoms. So why do these communities want to engage so actively with homophobic, elitist and misogynist content?

Grey academia deliberately widens the notion of an academic core to include identities the original core seemed likely to exclude, challenging the concept of a governing aesthetic itself. Claiming to be ‘agnostic of a single aesthetic’, its wiki says: ‘Regardless of your personal aesthetic expressions, you’re welcome in grey academia.’[12] Its aesthetic diversity means it’s not instantly visually recognisable. A commentator who pointed out, ‘there’s no consistwnt [sic] aesthetic here’ was piled on: ‘We value practically [sic] over aesthetic. We aren’t DA or royal core, if you don’t like us, then stay in your lane.’ In grey academia, affirmative speech acts – a declaration of belonging to the aesthetic – have replaced visuals as aesthetic identity. ‘At their deepest level,’ Sianne Ngai writes in *Theory of the Gimmick*, ‘aesthetic judgments are not about objects at all. As speech we are compelled to share or imagine ourselves sharing, at the risk of rebuff or even ridicule’, and these speech acts ‘concern our relation to other judging subjects’.[13]

These exchanges still require an object. Type ‘aesthetic’ into any search engine and you see representations of bodies. Google proposes a series of search completions, starting with ‘aesthetic body’ (first click, a picture of a naked male torso – to aspire to, or to desire?), followed by ‘aesthetic outfits’ (an indistinct thumbnail – clicked on, it’s populated by young, designer-dressed East Asian women), then ‘aesthetic person’ (eighteenth-century guys in wigs: all white and western; all professionals in academia, arts or philosophy). From the ways they’re presented it’s clear that these bodies have different relationships to aesthetics: the nude male torsos are stripped of individuality by the decapitating frame; the full-body shots of the clothed young women emphasise aesthetics as commodified choice. The headshots of philosophers reduce the body to the head, indicating that their relationship to aesthetics is theory-only.

If the body is the tool of aesthetic representation, then using it to recognise yourself within an identity from which you have historically been excluded (queer cottagecore, dark academia of colour) is a complex practice. The Cameroonian historian and political thinker Achille Mbembe centres images of the black, female body in the construction of strategies

that allow the postcolonial subject to ‘recognise himself [*sic*]’. Although, Mbembe writes, ‘in racist contexts, “to represent” is the same thing as “to disfigure” ’, representations that are – within the western archive – ‘forbidden’, have the power to ‘disarm the archive’ as they ‘cannot be the object of consumption’.[14]

Viewing their representations, these bodies ‘accept seeing themselves as Others’. Does this othering happen at the point of image creation, or is it is at the point of its entry into the context of the western ‘archive’ that the black image ‘always runs the risk of being transformed into an object or a plaything’? The idea of playthings is worth re-evaluating in an online context, where identities exist in a situation of play that mixes traditional political with elective aesthetic categories, combining the ‘forbidden ‘with the ‘object of consumption’. It is unclear whether the images Mbembe discusses are ever self-representation. Mbembe does not consider the possibilities of the black, female artist – or imagines the amateur online creator who both plays and is her own plaything, who collects and juxtaposes found images with her own on Tumblr or Pinterest, who photographs herself on Instagram or films herself on TikTok.

Find related content
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Find related content
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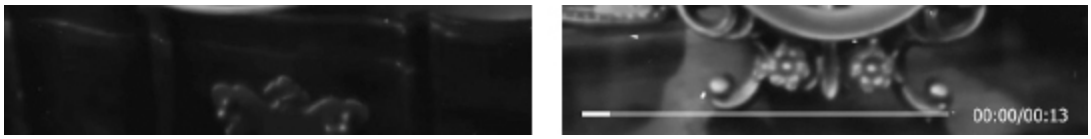
Find related content

Find related content
My
Aesthetic



Three screenshots captured from @cosyfaerie's TikTok (2024), proposing a dark academia of colour.

The intersection of race and (specifically female) gender has long been a site of both over- and underfocus in male-written aesthetic theory, where identities are images but seldom subjects. In his 1979 book *Subculture*, Dick Hebdige examined how subcultures intersected with race, but he did not investigate female or queer subcultures, which might have been just too sub for him. He vaguely refers to the 'emergence of feminism', but has no curiosity about its range of aesthetic expressions.[15] As Angela McRobbie points out in her long-term work on girls' culture beginning with her 1980 essay, 'Settling Accounts with *Subculture*', girls have been culturally 'present but invisible' in cultural studies: assumed trivial; presumed malleable, stereotypically adopting the aesthetics of their boyfriends (aesthetics as impregnation, or perhaps STD); overrepresented in cultures of consumption and underrepresented in aesthetic identities that, as Hebdige writes, depend on 'a gesture of defiance or contempt, in a smile or a sneer'.[16] Now such gestures have become the preserve of Silicon Valley 'disruptors', what options are left when the 'subversive' too often subverts and disrupts vulnerable lives?

Writing earlier in the same decade, Herbert Marcuse saw female aesthetic expression as key. If, as Marcuse suggests, 'the patriarchal society has created a female image', he proposes, 'a female counter-force, which may still become one of the gravediggers of patriarchal society'. There's nothing more typical of dominant culture than the idea that a subculture, created via its exclusions, could be its saviour.[17] Sadly, the idea that 'isolation (separation) from the alienated work world of capitalism enabled the woman to remain less brutalized by the Performance Principle, to remain closer to her sensibility', lacks an awareness (though Marcuse met with

Kate Millet and taught Angela Davis) of his feminist contemporaries' re-examination of domestic, sexual and aesthetic labour as work.[18] Marcuse also fails to point out that the experience he described was limited largely to Western, white, middle and upper-class women.

It's unclear whether Marcuse's female 'counter-force' to the patriarchal female image rests on the destruction of these images, the creation of new images or a refusal to make any images at all – or via engagement with them, détourning those we have. Nor does Marcuse note that those women excluded from the world of work and formal politics were already involved in aesthetics as the subject of images of consumption, as well as the interface for domestic consumption.

I'd hope that Mbembe at least could be persuaded to welcome an online situation in which image-makers manipulate and inhabit impersonal images to create contingent identities that enable something. On the surface, this is unlikely. The screen may be 'the new scene', as Mbembe writes, but: 'The screen does not only seek to abolish the distance between fiction and reality. It has become reality-generating,' which, for Mbembe, holds no politically creative possibilities.[19] It is the meatspace 'accident represented by our place of birth', twinned with 'our status as passersby' that is 'the base from which we create culture'. Though he plays on Frantz Fanon's *passant*, cosmopolitan self, Mbembe does not see the screen as a place to come from or to go towards, or even to pass through. Nor does he think about the alternative meanings of the French word *passer*: s*e faire passer*, to imitate, to pass for, or – as so many culturally marginalised people must – *to pass*. Nor does he consider *passer* in its meaning as to appear onscreen (*ce film passe au cinéma*, this film is on at the cinema; *elle passe à la télé*, she is on TV). These two meanings are central to core aesthetics identities.

What does it mean, as a member of a marginalised political identity, to play with the aesthetics of a dominant culture? What happens when a TikToker like @cosyfaerie takes on an identity that has been coded white and – mostly – male? She is not trying to 'pass'. Her admiration for the identities she cosplays embeds critique: she uses aesthetics to highlight her

exclusion from both IRL historic Ivy League academia, and from its imaginary. In doing this she may solve one of the problems Hebdige poses, that of recuperation: 'Those young people who choose to inhabit a spectacular youth culture are simultaneously *returned*, as they are represented on T.V. and in the newspapers, to the place where common sense would have them fit.'[20]

Hebdige's subcultures rely, for their continued existence, on their images' social unreadability, except in the broadest terms as Other. TikTokers like @cosyfaerie know that those participating in online subcultures have little choice but visibility, as they are working via networks facilitated by structures that are the opposite of 'sub': commercial platforms that bring in money by their users being as visible as possible. Mbembe talks about the importance not only of having a story, but of being *seen* to have a story ('to be black means to be placed by the force of things on the side of those that go unseen') – to bring identities into spaces of social recognition.

The American philosopher Nancy Fraser worries that demands for visibility cannot be answered outside the 'superficial level of appearances'. Such requests Fraser writes, result in a 'reification of identity' that not only sidelines demands for economic and political redistribution but fails to accommodate the variety and changeability of any identity's intersections with economic and class difference.[21]

But reification of identity is not only a result of calls for recognition. Solidarities created in response to the offline realities of economic and class difference can also reify into identities based on wrongs that eventually limit the demands that any group can make by continually turning that identity back to a point of suffering. When Fraser suggests substituting a model of identity based not on recognition but on *status*, which she defines as depending on the ability of members of identified groups to act within cultural and political institutions (marriage, workplace, government), this limits her goal to integration within existing structures. It also allows dominant powers to integrate representatives of these groups on the understanding that they labour to maintain a wrongs-based identity. As the

price for entry into a space of cultural power, they must continually strive to maintain a niche that limits their movement and expression (a.k.a. tokenism).

The structural value of variety and changeability, rather than the content of any particular aesthetic, is the core of online aesthetic identities. Like Hebdige's subculture, which, according to McRobbie, is beneficially 'several steps away from the material conditions of its followers' existence', Wikidentities deliberately ignore economic and class intersections.[22] Instead they expand the social imaginary by claiming unfamiliar aesthetic gestures, an action that (inevitably) plays with available cultural resources. In no way the only means necessary for dealing with identity-based injustice, this is a vital strategy that Lauren Berlant called 'juxtapolitical', an alternative developed by, and available to, those whose needs mainstream politics does not address, or whom it aggressively excludes.

Juxtapolitics is not 'common sense,' which Hebdige's contemporary Stuart Hall agrees, gets you nowhere fast: 'You cannot learn, through common sense, *how things are*: you can only discover *where they fit* into the existing scheme of things'.[23]

Aesthetic cores' conversion of common-sense reality to the superficial level of appearances is not only literally anti-reification but creates an invitation to play with apparently hostile images, offering a form of critical engagement that is easily dismissed because of its persistent and tenacious refusal to 'fit into the existing scheme of things'. Aesthetics Wiki's open trivialisation of the reification of identity is, at the same time, undoubtedly sincere. Its sincerity is not focused on adherence to any particular identity but to a practice of self-interpretation via hostile models. These identities are not reified by defining points of mutual exclusion, as Fraser describes, but remain flexible and interconnected areas of mutual interrelation. As such, they offer a more optimistic model for solidarity than many established political strategies.

Wikidentities point up the friction between user and image, exposing cracks in social patterns of readability that allow in something that Mbembe identifies as ‘vulnerability’, which happens when ‘the subject [is] exposed to other existences that threaten its own’. The vulnerability of the image-maker who plays at inhabiting a hostile image opens up a vulnerability in the viewer. This demands something beyond the mere call for recognition that Fraser condemned. For both the image-maker and the viewer, ‘allowing oneself to be affected by others – or to be defenselessly exposed to another existence – constitutes the first step toward that form of recognition that will not be contained in the master-slave paradigm,’ Mbembe writes: ‘On the contrary, the kind of relation that arises from it is a *relation of care*.’

To take part in an affective relationship via an image is a good description of fandom, and to be mutually exposed to others via affects carried by mediating images is a good description of Aesthetics Wiki. Fandom – online or off – is a channel for affect, which is less personal emotion than communal vibe. Thinkers from Sedgewick to Berlant to Ahmed have used it to examine social identities. Brian Massumi defined it as a ‘prepersonal intensity corresponding to the passage from one experiential state of the body to another and implying an augmentation or diminution in that body’s capacity to act’. As such, affect works a bit like a medium – like what we call media – with the body deeply involved at both ends of the process. Aesthetics Wiki images are both placeholders for the offline body and markers of its absence from certain situations, either IRL or from its associated imaginary. If Massumi and Mbembe are right, the affects carried by these images enlarge the body’s capacity to act, online and off.

What’s the difference between a core aesthetic and a subculture? In a 2022 post on his website vowlenu.com, titled ‘Aesthetics Internet Culture and Lifestyle Explained’, Gregory Venvonis – a self-appointed codifier of internet aesthetics, and self-confessed aesthetics noob – gives a useful distinction between Hebdige’s world and his own: ‘Subcultures have a

complete kit of a shared identity such as birthplace, belief system(s), history, cuisines, music, fashion, goals, art, and customs. Aesthetics focus mostly on visual, artistic, and lifestyle elements and are not tied to belief systems, ethnicity, skin color, sexuality, or birthplace.' Vevonis's proto-encyclopaedia of aesthetic categories is a bizarre but appropriate mix of marketing-speak, cod-academia, self-help and sales pitch. Using a hyper-amateur approach, Venvonis imitates any number of professional styles, and there is no longer even the pretence of a barrier between any of these roles.

Venvonis is an advocate of an extreme form of the power of aesthetics as identity choice: 'reality shifting', a practice that has been compared to lucid dreaming, in which adherents induce a 'shift' that allows them to use a chosen identity to enter an alternate reality on repeat. An aesthetic practice, it requires a script, a 'document that contains essential details for your Desired Reality and the goals for your Desired Reality experience', and frequently relies on commercial fandoms (Venvonis mentions popular shifts to Hogwarts or MCU – the Marvel Cinematic Universe). The practice of describing and defining an aesthetic is used both as a prompt to induce the shift, and to allow shifters to take on desired personas.

The problem with Vowlenu's proto-encyclopaedia is that, as with Hebdige's *Subculture*, it's the work of a single intelligence, which is exactly what core aesthetics are not. The subness in Hebdige's *Subculture* is deeply involved in the post-Romantic idea of the individual versus society, or in generational conflict which, in Hebdige's day, was shorthand for politics. Except for Hebdige's writing on reggae, he does not extend the potential for ritual identity as resistance outside his youth demographic, which, by virtue of his era's vertical age demographic, ends by excluding anyone old enough to be teaching at a university, including Hebdige himself. In the 1970s you couldn't be an embodied thinker, both performer and critic. You couldn't write about cool and *be* cool.

Hebdige doesn't probe the assumed hermetic nature of the twentieth-century identities he examines: you can't be mod and ted at the same time, or blend them. Nor does he consider the spectrum of less committed

teenagers who didn't participate fully in any of these identities, though they consumed the same music and fashion as fans and helplessly shared the same range of class and race positions. Hebdige's subcultures also tend toward reification and finish: each 'ends in the construction of a style'.[24] This may have seemed a goal in the punk era, but history says otherwise. The constant morphing of punk into goth, and goth into emo and beyond, is evidence of the subculture as an evolving vehicle for a modulated range of affects.

It was so very difficult, in Hebdige's day, to use your image to détourne any idea. It was expensive to change your clothes IRL and it was taboo to present in certain situations in certain ways. Tattoos were more or less irreversible. It took time to grow out that hair colour and, forbidden at school or in the office, your reputation might be permanently tainted. Online, appearances can be put on more easily, but our online lives are still seen at best as 'sub' – second, inauthentic – or, at worst, dishonest, the anon domains of catfishing and trolling. Despite the fact we're all post-internet, this cognitive dissonance remains, meaning that all online identities are now simultaneously 'sub' and 'culture'.

Aesthetic cores tackle a problem similar to that encountered by pre-internet fans of fantasy fiction: how to build a world that does not, like the narratives it's based in, end. In the absence of plot, aesthetics come to the fore. Though some aesthetics refer to plot-driven narratives (academia aesthetics repeatedly mention Donna Tart's *The Secret History*), there is a desire to inhabit the worlds of these narratives without the narrative closure of a book, play or film. Their mindset is more like fanfic or its offline predecessors, which tended to be tied to genres labelled middle or low-brow: comics, soap operas, superhero movies, fantasy novels. The experience of engagement with these genres values a practice of building fictional worlds, over an appreciation of any individual creator's expertise.

It's no surprise that interest in the previously tiny Aesthetics Wiki exploded during the first 2020 lockdown, when – for many – time unravelled and isolation saw the sort of 'organized collective work'

(Mbembe) that did ‘immense work on objects and on forms’, taking place via virtual representation. If Mbembe said this kind of retelling of ‘culture . . . distinctly aims to overturn history’, it also felt like a series of small personal reconfigurations.[25]

Post-lockdown’s peak ‘core’ moment, Sarah Spellings wrote in July 2022’s edition of British *Vogue* that, like chic, to name a trend as ‘core . . . is as vague as calling something good’ and that ‘it’s time to retire the expression’.[26] But aesthetic cores have a vagueness that won’t give up. They migrated from Tumblr to Instagram to TikTok and are refusing to leave.

What uses can amateurs make of elective and blended identities, in which more traditional forms of analysis are replaced by iteration and modulation – by show and tell, by affect’s constant, tapestried murmur, without boundaries and without limits? Here is a selection of as-yet unfilled-out pages on the Aesthetics Wiki.

Materialism
This page is under construction

Environment
This page is under construction

And on ‘visuals’
Historical, Social, & Regional Context
This page is under construction

Stages of Life
This page is under construction

Urban/Rural Spectrum
This page is under construction

Seasons
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Cynicism vs. Idealism
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Relationship with Reality
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2015: In Praise of the Trash Essay

We tell ourselves stories in order to live.

Joan Didion, *The White Album*

I was at a lecture on the personal essay by a distinguished critic who drew a direct line from the work of Hazlitt through Woolf and Didion to the personal essayists of today. The thread was clear and fine-spun. It seemed to run taut without snags or tangles. But there was something missing. During the Q&A, I put up my hand: What about the online personal essay boom of the 2010s? What about LiveJounal and vlogs and YouTube essays, and now Substacks and Tinyletters? What about my own writing origins as a blogger, working in a genre mashup I'd created with no guidance, a meet-cute between autofiction and lifestyle journalism, threesoming with activism, chicklit and critical theory?

I could have made my point eloquently, but some devil in me made me perform what I described. Like the essays I referred to, I was insistent, I was clumsy. My attitude was over-personal. I was small-focus, subjective. I appeared emotional. I was impassioned. I brought in my own work on the works he mentioned, written in homage to the style of these works, real *essais* – harking back to the French origin of the word – *attempts* that would never have reached print without amateur self-publication online.

Personal testimony brought a shiver of discomfort to the room. I was discomfited myself, knowing that this was a conference, not a book club, a consciousness-raising group or an evangelical service. The audience wasn't looking to hear testimony, to be moved. Or perhaps not. A black woman, the only black woman in the audience, agreed with me that these online works had cracked open the essay form for readers and writers without easy

access elsewhere. That it was because of *Bustle* pieces about bad boyfriends and *Jezebel* gross-out tampon stories that people were reading Baldwin and Solnit and Eula Biss. It's because they saw her packing list on Instagram that readers turned to Didion; or started to think they could write, if not *like* her, then in that genre. Readers? OK, mostly women. The speaker didn't mention that either. The essay had become a thing, so often a female thing. *Because internet*.

In 2017, the professional personal essayist Jia Tolentino, a staff writer at the *New Yorker*, declared what she called the online personal essay boom over. Like Laura Bennett in her 2015 essay 'First Person Industrial Complex' at *Slate*, Tolentino described the boom as exploitative of (mostly) female writers, who were encouraged to 'expose' themselves for little or no pay, but 'for the exposure'. At best, Tolentino wrote, these were opportunities for non-pro writers to 'try to figure out if they had something to say', in 'a writerly style that seemed to exist for no good reason'.[1]

This double whammy of bad conditions and bad products reminded me of the joke from the movie *Annie Hall*: 'The food at this place is really terrible . . . and such small portions!' And it made me a little suspicious to hear it from someone who repeatedly chose to eat at that particular restaurant. Not only did Tolentino admit to beginning her career by writing personal essays online for free, but she edited at Jezebel, one of the platforms she criticised, where (according to Bennett) she asked wannabe writer Riv Chénier, author of a confessional essay about incest, 'On Falling In and Out of Love with My Dad' – 'was she ready for this to be on her Google results forever?'[2]

What interests me about what I'm going to call the trash essay – trash because it's so frequently trashed, because it's considered disposable, because it can be trashy as in what Tolentino called 'flashy', and because its quality is indeed varied (but, hey, so is all online writing) – is that it produces so much anxiety. Why? Because it seems amateur? Because personal stories can seem more adjacent to gossip than art? Because it lets in writers who have no training, some of whom make no claim to art, and,

confusingly, some who do? Because its backstory as debut writing – ‘written by a person you’ve never heard of’, as Tolentino writes – allows a kind of blurring of author and audience, amateur and professional?[3]

This anxiety is a variety of that old question faced by any aesthetic development: *But is it art?* This hides another question: What factors qualify or disqualify something as art? The trash essay has been evaluated on a kind of sliding scale between ‘truth’ and ‘art’: the more truth there is, the less art. Truth is a matter of content, and art, a matter of style – an old chestnut challenged, but never really vanquished, by twentieth-century avant-gardes.

In her pre-internet framing of this problem, *On Style* (1965), Susan Sontag identifies style as a locus for the tension created by this ‘pseudo-problem,’ of ‘art versus morality,’ which ‘rests on not putting the ethical into question, but only the aesthetic’. Sontag associates ‘truth and morality’ with what she calls ‘content’, and ‘art’ with what she calls ‘style’.

‘What is “content”?’ Sontag asks. It’s a good question. Content is what the net is said to be made of. The age-old division between style and content is not in fact a division but an action: a continuously renewed attempt to divide, hinging on a declaration of a work of art as ‘good’ or ‘bad’. Sontag herself gives the example of Leni Riefenstahl’s film celebrating the 1933 German Olympics, *The Triumph of the Will*, which she classifies as art because its style has value beyond the ethics of its content. But she uses this example to create a false inference. Noticeable ethical intent becomes the marker of bad art: ‘A work of art, so far as it is a work of art, cannot – whatever the artist’s personal intentions – advocate anything at all. The greatest artists attain a sublime neutrality.’[4]

This is Sontag at her least convincing, using grand phrases to propose an art found in the backwash of history, a sublime detritus visible only after the political valences of any work have evaporated. Anything that looks like it has intent can be tagged as non-art. Backed into the ethics corner, its political potential is limited to the direct and factual requests of journalism. As it can’t be judged aesthetically impressive, it becomes ‘content’.

The problem is that, online, intent is what marks art off from content creation. The contemporary online meaning of content has morphed to mean writing that can ‘advocate anything at all’ – often a commercial product – but at the same time seems styleless or, strangely, uses stylelessness as its style. But the content of the trash essay works differently from the kind of content we call auto-generated. The auto of automatic in auto-generated content sits strangely beside the trash essay’s auto of autobiographical.

Sontag uses ‘ethics’ and ‘morality’ interchangeably, to cover any ‘form of consciousness, aimed at action’.[5] But: ‘There’s a fundamental difference between Ethics and Morality,’ wrote Gilles Deleuze, describing Spinoza’s stance. Ethics ‘never asks what we must do’, but ‘what we are capable of, what’s in our power, ethics is a problem of power’.[6] Most trash essays have an upfront intent to use content to address problems of power and to test what is in the power of writing. ‘In 2016,’ Twitter user @RHAVote recalls, ‘@Jezebel let me share my 3rd tri[mester] abortion story and the logistical barriers I experienced getting it. It completely changed our lives. Since then, they’ve been a go-to source for good info about later abortion, helping us make the case for NO BANS’. @RHAVote is two people, dedicated to a cause, not a career in writing. Nevertheless, the trash essay continues to insist that it is not campaigning journalism but the essay, a form of art.

‘For a work of art to have “content” ’ Sontag writes, ‘is, in itself, a rather special stylistic convention . . . the knowledge we gain through art is an experience of the form or style of knowing something, rather than a knowledge of something.’[7] Content online is not only facts or story, but also a way, or ways, of writing. Condemned as both too generic and too personal, the writers of the trash essay do not so much have style as what Sontag called ‘stylisation’. This is a category Sontag invented to deny content’s categorical separation from style, which she uses to separate ‘stylised’ works from good art, on the grounds that their noticeable excess of a certain style reaches a pitch of artificiality. If content is ethical and

style is aesthetic, then stylisation, in its blatant excess, becomes style *as* content, which is to say, style as ethics.

Though the trash essay is ethical, it is not stylised in a way Sontag might recognise. If Sontag excluded certain productions from art via their stylistic excess, online content is often marked by its opposite: stylistic blandness as any work in which the writer appears to address the reader with direct intent can be classed as stylistically naïve.

To invert Sontag, critical focus here rests on *not putting the aesthetic into question, but only the ethical*. The trash essay, condemned by Tolentino as having a 'writerly style that seems to exist for no good reason', reverses Sontag's 'notion that style is an accessory to content' to become the idea that content is an accessory to style.

What is the style of the infamous Jezebel incest essay? It's short, mostly simply told, sprinkled with a few highfalutin phrases: 'spouting empty assurances'; 'looking aloof'; 'I fled the room'. Unvoyeuristic, it concentrates on the author's feelings, not actions, with an emphasis on guilt and disgust that make its perspective unimpeachable for the most conservative reader. As an editor myself, as well as a writer, I get the feeling this essay has been carefully edited. It feels less a holding space for literary than for social production. Approximately a third of the essay is given over to politically slanted analysis: father/daughter incest is clandestinely allowed as a cultural trope in a misogynistic society; women are held responsible as the site of sex; genetic attraction is physiologically common and shouldn't be demonised. In 2015, when the essay went viral, Tolentino interviewed its writer, who said, 'until now I've been very protective of the story,' but who, through writing the essay, felt part of an ethical community: 'Keeping it a secret protects the people who abused us.'[8]

The intent of the trash essay is the opposite of 'good' style; and, though I like 'good' style, I also like the questioning of what is *good* in style, which the trash essay does by *being good*, or having an ethical purpose. That its

ethical intent is signalled by not having good style creates a problem in aesthetics.

Not wishing to subscribe to the style/content and art/ethics divides, Sontag tries to reconcile these 'traditionally conceived' opposites.[9] It's the trying that's the problem, as it invokes what it desires to deny. Unlike Sontag, I don't strive to erase the art/ethics and style/content dichotomies, or think of them as something to be resolved, but to look at them as dialectics that produce an aesthetic specific to the trash essay, making it never *not* – but retaining its ethical stance, never *quite* – art.

If the foregrounding of content is a 'stylistic convention,' then the trash essay creates a double bind for its author. Rather than taking *out* the trash, the trash essay *brings it*, in the sense of offering the challenge of an unfamiliar experience for the reader. At the end of 2014, the peak of the trash essay boom, the queer/female site Autostraddle notes that it had

> published 70 personal essays . . . 54% were by writers of color . . . and topics ran the gamut: dwarfism, fibromyalgia, conditional queer love in Russia, reclaiming abuelita knowledge as a brown ecofeminista, bulimia and race, the revolutionary possibilities of brunch for a queer fagette, editing BDSM erotica as a queer top, gaming while female, queer black women in love – the list goes on and on.[10]

Insofar as a 'common reader' is inferred, this content must be 'un-common' – or perhaps this works inversely, the content leaving a gap in which a reader can be constructed.

Because the trash essay aspires to the personal essay model of – sometimes gonzo – experience, the writer attached to this 'un-common' content is also likely to be marginalised, hence the trash essay's reputation for opening gates to writers from underrepresented backgrounds, but also for requiring the writer to present via a 'stylistic convention' of transgressive content: 'stylisation' as TMI.

Fear of the trash essay is fear of what Fredric Jameson called ‘multitudes’: ‘the definitive appearance of the Other in multiple forms and as sheer quantity or number’.[11] The kind of horror at the formlessness of personal writing online is the same as modernism’s horror – whether you go for Eliot’s or Lovecraft’s version – of ‘the masses’. The trouble for any retro-modernist is that online the masses refuse to stay mass. They insist that they are subjects, with a voice – not mass voice, as in a political demonstration, but individual voices, as individual subjects, as the personal essay demands. Problem is, this individualism is facilitated by platforms that profit from the production of the self online, and that tie self to profit for the writer.

Laura Bennett noticed ‘self-awareness’ as the ‘defining trait’ of what she called ‘the best first-person writing’. The best kind of authors, she wrote, ‘were building relationships with readers via self-exposure, cultivating boundary-pushing personas that encouraged a kind of voyeuristic investment in their shifting personal dramas and thoughts’.[12] ‘Self-exposure’ has marked the trash essay as trashable for so-called narcissism, something art is meant to bypass. But it is less self-centred than many professional productions whose real subject is to make recognisable the style of a single writer in the game of establishing their name professionally. Centred on the event, not the author, the trash essay’s construction of a ‘stylised’ rather than ‘stylistic’ self, that fits the genre rather than the individual, leaves it open to dual accusations of artlessness and artificiality.

This is an essential dividing line between trash essays, which Bennett called ‘professional dead ends’, and those professional personal essays, including Tolentino’s, that the professional personal essayist Lauren Oyler, writing in 2020 in the *London Review of Books*, critiqued for managing to ‘make any observation about the world lead back to their own lives and feelings, though it should be the other way round’.[13]

Oyler termed this mode ‘hysterical criticism’, based on the critic James Woods’s 1990s coinage *hysterical realism*, which he used to categorise

fiction about real social issues written in what Sontag would have called a ‘stylised’ manner. Neither Woods nor Oyler intended a compliment. Woods’s objection to hysterical realism is ‘not made at the level of verisimilitude, but at the level of morality: this style of writing is not to be faulted because it lacks reality – the usual charge against botched realism – but because it seems evasive of reality while borrowing from realism itself. It is not a cock-up, but a cover-up.’[14]

The writers Woods skewers are notably female and/or of colour, and hysterical realism may not be moral but, in its immorality, may be rather ethical. Its characters and situations may not feel very real in the realist mode, and it may be difficult to engage with them on realist terms. All the better, perhaps, as vehicles to discuss big issues with a kind of Brechtian distance. The only reason hysterical realist writing doesn’t feel very Brechtian is that its aesthetic has little to do with early twentieth-century European avant-garde minimalism.

Oyler’s objections to hysterical criticism operate somewhat differently, inversely even, in that they identify the use of ‘realistic’ and ‘personal’ prose to express problems its writers may not have in any serious measure, but can claim as part of an identity group. They ‘perform hysteria because they know their audience respects the existence of those problems, and the chance that they may be sincere makes them difficult to criticise’.[15]

‘Approving or disapproving morally of what a work of art “says” is just as extraneous as becoming sexually excited by a work of art. (Both are, of course, very common).’[16] Sontag is honest enough not to deny some of the ways people engage with art, even as she tries to separate them from genuine aesthetic experience. But what if sexual excitement and concomitant moral dis/approval (a.k.a. clickbait prurience) were not *outside* the art of the trash essay but central to it? Like hysterical realism, the trash essay plays out a cathartic experience of ethics, as tragedy does of grief, and it claims a similar aesthetic distance. In the case of the trash essay this aesthetic distance is limited, as its online situation requires a live ethical reaction from its reader – if not action, then at least outrage in the

comments box. Critics have often considered moral judgement of aesthetic work a naïve response. But, in the trash essay at least, this provocation to judgement is entirely intentional; it critiques the separation of ethics and aesthetics, style and content, art and life.

This can backfire. ‘Brand safety’ was a factor in Jezebel’s 2023 closure, hastened by advertisers using AI that could ‘feel’.[17] The ‘IAS semantic intelligence engine’ was used by advertisers to identify and ‘exclude content relating to protests, demonstrations, brutality, and riots that elicit negative feelings such as fear, sadness, horror, and suffering’. It did not read Jezebel essays as works of art. It excluded the trash essay not on Tolentino’s grounds of aesthetic professionalism, but on ethical grounds, failing to account for the reaction of the audience as readers of a creative work, who can enjoy writing that might ‘elicit negative feelings,’ from high tragedy to gross-out humour.

Jezebel, the online magazine where Tolentino worked between 2013 and 2016, was founded in 2007 by Anna Holmes, who characterised its style as a ‘feminist . . . model of critical thinking around gender and race which felt accessible and entertaining’. Jezebel, Holmes wrote, ‘knew a little something about how to politicize a generation of young women – not by enforcement of doctrine but by example’. This old-skool, amateur low-church method ties a speaker to their story. The site relied heavily on the personal essay including, Holmes admits, ‘gross-out’ stories, published ‘not to attract outsized attention but to engage in a bit of truthtelling’.[18]

The misogyny faced by female content creators who ‘engage in a bit of truthtelling’ has been well documented by Taylor Lorenz in her book *Extremely Online*. It can seem impossible for a woman whose writing is identified as her ‘natural’ voice to be judged skilful enough to reach even amateur status. Sianne Ngai, in her essay on ‘Paranoia’ (*Ugly Feelings*) noticed that the gendered status of so-called intuitive creativity had already been elevated, in male-written critical theory of the twentieth century, to something to envy. The near impossibility for the trash essayist to graduate

to professional status is mirrored by professional essayists' desire to capture something of their apparent authenticity.

Theodor Adorno, if he were still alive and ever admitted to reading Jezebel, might call this 'radical naturalism'. Writing about the (cinema) screens of his day, this approach worked to 'dissolve all surface coherence of meaning and finish up as the antithesis of familiar realism'.[19] Realism, as we all know, is a construct but, to set up bifurcated natural/unnatural modes, as Sontag does with 'style' and 'stylisation', only opens up a hall of mirrors. As Sontag herself pointed out, aesthetic revolutionaries often call for a change of style via a disavowal of style itself. The trash essay's seemingly naïve 'stylisation' not only points up the artificiality of the professional personal essay's smooth 'familiar realism' but, highlights the artificiality of its own natural pose, which is what makes it annoying, provocative, trashy. Its acceptance of its own non-style as 'stylised' (therefore codified and reproducible) may allow its writers some distance on their 'gross-out' exposures, but it also exposes a stylistic breakup that threatens to trash the entire surface of personal writing online.

If the style of 'the greatest art seems secreted, not constructed' (note the complex suggestion of a semblance as 'great' art's key ingredient), the trash use of the personal essay form as a vehicle for an artificially styleless voice is a rebellion against the smooth 'style' Sontag describes. If, as she claims, 'whenever speech or movement or behavior or objects exhibit a certain deviation from the most direct, useful, insensible mode of expression or being in the world, we may look at them as having a "style," and being both autonomous and exemplary,' then the trash essay's 'stylelessness' leans away from both exemplarity and autonomy.[20] Nothing is secret, everything's on the surface: both its intent and its artificially natural style that, too obviously, 'seemed to exist for no good reason'. Both its style and content reveal too much, simultaneously foregrounding revelation as something artificial, tropey. It is a vulgar form: vulgar as in popular, accessible to the majority as readers and writers, and vulgar in that it makes

a style out of the continual act of revealing what is considered unmentionable.

Do I have to be abject to make it as a trash essayist? Abjecting myself may seem a process of distancing (literally casting out) self from self. ‘There is nothing like the abjection of self’, wrote Julia Kristeva, ‘to show that all abjection is in fact recognition of the want on which any being, meaning, language, or desire is founded.’[21] If abjection is a way of expressing a ‘want’ of language, and a desire for language to describe selves and meanings that didn’t previously exist in written form, then the abject content of the trash essay is not straightforward content alone, but a style of calling for a style that can fulfil the lack Kristeva described. This content-as-style could be called *dis-content.*

Dis-content is the opposite of content in both senses. Unwilling to settle for the content it provides, this discontent works not to solve the problem it addresses, but to dis-solve its content as content alone. It is no longer only a constative speech act that can be judged true or false; it is also a performative speech act that intends to change the social reality it is describing. The trash essay has a forward movement, its engine, the revelation of moving content. At the height of the trash essay boom, Buzzfeed ran a list of the ‘Most Moving Personal Essays You Needed To Read in 2015’. In order to engage with the trash essay, we have to get trashy: we must be willing to be moved.

The growth of the trash essay online has sometimes been called a movement, but it is movement as style, a style that works as a movement towards the ‘normalisation’ of its content, which can also grant its authors and readers greater freedom of movement IRL. Sontag says something similar about Jean Starobinski’s work on eighteenth-century art, in which ‘art is seen as the naming of emotions. Emotions, longings, aspirations, by thus being named, are virtually invented and certainly promulgated by art,’

and this allows ‘new ideas of self-mastery and of mastery of the world, as embodying new relations between the self and the world’.[22]

The trash essay’s real-isation (revelation of what’s real) – enacted as the slow dawning on the writer’s avatar that, *yes, this was abuse*, or alternatively (sometimes concurrently), *yes this was OK* – is what Maurice Blanchot calls the drive to ‘domesticate’ via art. Domestication is a word with a bad rep, but Blanchot uses it to describe the movement from the transgressive to the ‘normal’ – or, as it was known online *c*.2020, *normalise everything*.

As Oyler points out, while this *moving* style may seem transgressive, it’s culturally embedded, which is why it’s writers with the most culturally acceptable identities whose ‘outsider’ content is easily normalised. In 2014, Latoya Peterson, editor at the now defunct *Fusion*, pointed out that black women’s confessional essays hardly ever help them to establish a professional career, that white women’s work is given attention but also demonised, and that only personal writing by white men escapes being ‘framed as a gross-out confessional’.[23] When the trash essay is judged according to the identity of the author, so that their content becomes, as Sontag writes, ‘a rather special stylistic convention’.

The codification of of ‘personal’ writing as a style risks either the overidentification or disidentification of a writer with their content. This is, Blanchot writes, a risk taken when a work pursues something outside art and ‘the essence of language is radically placed in doubt’, with the result that the writer becomes an ‘exile’ from ‘truth’.[24] Some writers’ risks are bigger than others. To introduce vulnerable content-as-style to the essay’s established form can be a risky game for the debut or outsider writer who wants to see art speak of their experiences and retain the name art. Blanchot’s artist seems ‘to live at his pleasure in the imaginary where, were he to run a risk, it would still be nothing but an image’.[25] To risk your image is a very internet risk, like the risk of an essay showing up on your Google search results forever – and in 2015 Google really seemed as immutable as any major religion.

If the trash essay is an image, it's a form of selfie: a strange combination of the spontaneous and the studied, an image of and by amateurs who mime the professional poses of models and stars. One of *Salon*'s 2014 essays of the year, D. Watkins's 'Too Poor for Pop Culture', was subheaded 'Where I Live in East Baltimore, Everything Looks Like "The Wire" and Nobody Cares What a "Selfie" Is'. In fact, the essay is all about caring what a selfie is. When the author's friend Dontay tells him, 'A yo, Michelle was gonna beat on Barack for taking dat selfie with dat chick at the Mandela wake! Whateva da fuk a selfie is!', it's clear that Dontay knows exactly what a selfie is, and what is at risk in taking it.[26] The risk is authenticity, the authenticity Obama had in 2008, which, Watkins writes, he had lost by 2014. Authenticity is at risk as soon as anything is seen to be a style.

The risk that the writer of the trash essay takes is double: the risk of Google infamy for revealing something 'true', twinned with the artificiality of an obvious, selfie-style pose. Watkins also works, as he tells us in the essay, on the precarious fringes of academia, and is additionally an editor at *Salon*, where he also writes lifestyle pieces that exhibit familiarity with 'those places where the chef sends you out something special to welcome you right before you put in your drink order', in which his stylisation is very different.[27]

The problem with truth is that it's all true. Watkins's lifestyle journalism is true; his selfie story is true. Watkins offers to take a selfie with his friends but never does. He writes the essay instead. The risk in writing fiction or the trash essay is 'the risk of an inoffensive game' (Blanchot), of reducing reality to its 'image', which nevertheless allows the pursuit of art in the name of moving experience into the area of truth.[28] In producing this area, the power of action IRL can be curtailed. To bind something to words is to shut down what Blanchot calls its 'possibility': including the possibility of death, which is the end of all possible risk. But this is only IRL. Online, the only risk is that (including after your death) something will turn up 'in your Google results forever'. But even Google is a possibility, not a given.

Riv Chénier, the author of the Jezebel incest essay who was warned, by Tolentino, about Google, was ‘sure she wanted to build her writing career around this’. Chénier describes themselves on their Jezebel bio as ‘a writer, musician, and award-winning literary scholar’. I’ve checked them out. They are on a PhD programme and have a JSTOR paper to their name as well as a 2015 Bandcamp album. They are the founder of the digital Joyce Word Dictionary. Their ‘Lexicographical Study of James Joyce and the *Oxford English Dictionary*’ (*James Joyce Quarterly*, summer 2014) testifies that when the Jezebel essay was written they were by no means unfamiliar with sophisticated writing.

Watkins and Chénier, two writers with links to the academic study of literature, were well aware of the power of language and the various ways of using it. Both understood that risk was involved in choosing from amongst the languages and styles available to them to inhabit the essay form. They understood something was at stake in veering between an accepted essayistic tone and literary versions of their personal languages. Both writers use languages that replace one risk with another. Introducing content that he assumes is unfamiliar to the reader, Watkins risks blaxploitation; keeping the reader safe, Chénier risks blandness. Tolentino (Bennett reports) minimised the possibility of ethical engagement for her readers, advising Chénier to cut ‘everything that would trigger a “YEA girl!” response’.

Chénier tried to claim their risk – and maybe their writing career would have turned out differently if Tolentino had allowed them to claim it as fully as they had desired. They didn’t realise that what was at risk was not over- but underexposure. The outrage is not that they were remembered, but that they were forgotten. ‘They didn’t know who I was; they didn’t know if I was a good writer. They just knew I’d experienced something terrible,’ Chénier said of Jezebel’s editorial team in an interview with Bennett.[29] Bennett’s essay is remembered in a way that Chénier’s is not; and you might remember the lost-tampon essay – I do – but do you remember the essayist?

‘I am writing a novel about all of this right now,’ Chénier told Tolentino.[30] A novel is not an essay. Chénier is quite clear that the same material can serve two different purposes, that there is a difference between fiction and non-.

The anxiety around style/art vs truth/content in the trash essay is parallelled with an exactly contemporaneous anxiety about the nature of truth in fiction. ‘Raw and real,’ enthuses the editor in *American Fiction*, the 2024 film adaptation of Percival Everett’s 2001 novel *Erasure*, as she acquires a ghettofabulous novel from a disaffected black, bourgeois college professor (as with Watkins and Chénier, it’s interesting to notice the fictional character has a professional perspective on style), masquerading as ex-con Stagg R. Leigh. Thelonious ‘Monk’ Ellison has already told the reader that the only black thing about his previous books is his jacket photo.

‘Mr Leigh, is this based on your actual life?’ a talk show host asks Ellison’s alter-ego (in the film version). It matters that it might be, in fiction as in non-fiction, both in Everett’s novel – published just before the explosion of blogging and microblogging/social media sites – and in the 2024 film made with the hindsight provided by influencers, clicktivism, TikTok and more. Social media platforms facilitated ways of narrativising the self that amateurs have used both to break, and to conform to, set identities. But these platforms simultaneously facilitated the recuperation of those identities to the capitalist project of niche marketing. The essayist and novelist Brandon Taylor (author of a novel called *Real Life*) writes, in his introduction to *Erasure*’s 2021 reissue, that IRL publishers ‘want to know if a character is black but they want that information to flow along the usual lines of communication’ – i.e. content as style.[31]

Personal language is the truth test in *American Fiction/Erasure*. Ellison can’t answer a greeting like ‘whassapp, bro?’ but, like Chénier, he can enjoy *Finnegans Wake* without feeling inauthentic. Joyce’s text, he decides in a flashback show-off teenage bid to impress (or outsmart) his father, ‘depends on the currency of conventional narrative for its experimental

validity,' just as Ellison had worked within a largely white experimental tradition to create works that he felt expressed his 'black life', exactly *because* this practice didn't 'flow along 'the usual lines of communication'.[32] Is Leigh's novel *true* because it flows along the fictional lines expected from a black writer? This is what's lurking behind the question the talk show host asks Ellison's alter-ego. 'Not factually, but it's the true story of what it's like to be a black man in America. Doing my time in prison,' Ellison lies, 'I learned that words belonged to everybody.'

Unlike the book, the film *American Fiction* can't be guaranteed an audience of Joyce-reading (or at least Joyce-cognisant) Ellisons for its laughs. While the book uses the range of styles available to Ellison, from his writing notes, academic papers and Stagg R. Leigh's novel, the film opts for a form that uses more of the 'currency of conventional narrative'. The characters are not Ellison's 2D linguistic experiments but 'rounded human beings'; they 'relate to each other'; there are 'feelgood moments'. There's less room in the film than in the novel for the camp fun of Sontag's 'stylisation'. It's no coincidence that classes stay in their lane: the blue-collar security guard dates the blue-collar housekeeper; the college professor, the lawyer – offering a portrait of American black life so unlike that presented in Leigh's book that it happily upholds white-instituted structures of economic power and class, and also of what Jürgen Habermas called bourgeois art.

Bourgeois culture has something to do with ideas of self, and also something to do with economics – both major factors in the trash essay, where economics as facilitator of self is more openly avowed than it is in the traditional personal essay. According to the cultural theorist Lauren Berlant, Habermas suggests that a 'bourgeois is someone who instrumentalises his social relations in terms of the rules of the market, and who is zoned by the people who assign value to property as having value in proximity to his property and his being self-possessed'.[33]

Habermas describes a dilemma that belongs to the trash essay as well as the novel: that of attempting to bring un-bourgeois content and style into a

historically bourgeois form which ‘had two expectations at once from its audiences. On the one hand, the layman who enjoyed art should educate himself to become an expert. On the other hand, he should also behave as a competent consumer who uses art and relates aesthetic experiences to his own life problems.’[34] We’re back to the division between approaches governed by aesthetics and ethics.

That the consumer of the trash essay is looking to ‘relate aesthetic experiences to his own life’s problems’ is the non-aesthetic approach for which the trash essay has been trashed. ‘This second, and seemingly harmless, manner of experiencing art’, Habermas continues, ‘has lost its radical implications, exactly because it had a confused relation to the attitude of being expert and professional.’[35]

The style of *American Fiction* the movie is both ‘expert and professional’ (Habermas) and an ‘inoffensive game’ (Blanchot) – or rather, a game of inoffensiveness. The trash essay is under pressure to express the ‘real’ as offensive, just as *real* is always twinned with what Leigh’s editor calls *raw*. But *American Fiction* leans away from *Erasure*’s slapstick stylisation. It *seems* real because its style is realist, the style we pretend not to notice.

‘My problem’, says Ellison, Leigh’s increasingly erased IRL alter-ego, ‘is that books like that aren’t real. They flatten our lives.’ He’s talking not about the unreality of realism, but the ‘raw and real’ writing of his rival, Juanita Mae Jenkins, another educated black American, author of the novel *We’s Lives In Da Ghetto*.

Jenkins is a major character in the film: in the book we encounter only her jacket photo. In *American Fiction* she appears as a counter-voice to Ellison’s. In a few sharply dialectic scenes, the two writers exemplify Habermas’s split perspective on art: Jenkins in the ethics corner; Ellison representing aesthetics. Jenkins doesn’t have to write about herself, she tells Monk. She writes about lives she wants to see accounted for, and her book was written from in-depth research and interviews. Leigh’s manuscript is as invented as his persona; Jenkins’ material is real but not at all personal. Ellison’s isn’t – and is.

‘The habits of thought which we owe to the commonplaces of subjective art lead us to believe that the artist or writer seeks to express himself and that for him what is missing from the Museum and from literature is he,’ Blanchot writes.[36] In a self-owning critique, this is what online culture calls main-character syndrome, a.k.a. acting like you’re the hero of your own life. As *Erasure*’s main character, named after the author of *The Invisible Man*, finds out, if he elects to identify with his fiction, then – just as in the trash essay – he risks erasure by the persona he has chosen. But if he chooses to write from aesthetic preference (Ellison’s previous novel was an ‘obscure reworking of a Greek tragedy’), his work is also erased as he cannot be identified in any simplistic way as its author.[37] There is no difference, in this process, between fiction and non-fiction, which met at an ethical vanishing point sometime in the 2010s. Trash essayists know that platforms want them to write like that, because the continuing illusion forms the pyramid scheme within which they work.

Funny thing is, every fictional reader, critic and editor in *Erasure*/*American Fiction* seems to have a stake in continuing what Taylor called the ‘usual lines of communication’, with its cycle of revelation and exploitation. Where does this leave the IRL readers/viewers (us)? Do we, via our avatar, Ellison, reject this cycle? And if we do, in the name of what ‘truth’ do we make this rejection?

What we’re set up to desire from *Erasure* is pretty similar to what Stagg R. Leigh’s readers desire from his novel. In both, a process of revelation answers a ‘reality hunger’, but Leigh’s revelation of so-called black experience via so-called black language is framed by Everett’s peekaboo game of paranoid reading in which nothing that is already revealed can also be ‘true’. Despite knowing we’re part of a real cinema audience, a real reading public, the fictional representations of ourselves, delighted to be fooled by ‘Leigh,’ allow the filmmaker/author to position us as (just as Ellison’s father tells him) ‘special’. This mechanism, regardless of the possible truth of what is revealed to us, hardly breeds solidarity.

The paranoid reading experience makes us, like Monk, and like Habermas's consumer of bourgeois art, unable to enjoy 'trash' (fiction or non-), either ethically or aesthetically. Positioned by the book/film to identify with Ellison, we are unable to engage with Jenkins's writing. Though both the novel and film question whether Ellison is really a model to follow, they both position ethics as a form of aesthetic engagement with a work's content as distinct from an 'expert' engagement with 'style'.

Habermas calls for an ethical readership that doesn't engage via style:

> [The] aesthetic experience which is not framed around the experts' critical judgments of taste can have its significance altered: as soon as such an experience is used to illuminate a life-historical situation and is related to life problems, it enters into a language game which is no longer that of the aesthetic critic,[38]

which allows the reader to 'move back and forth between the edifice of art and their own milieu until they were able to illuminate both'.[39]

'You think my book's trash?' Jenkins asks Ellison in *American Fiction*, identifying him as an 'expert' making a 'critical judgement'. Ellison thinks there's potential for wider depictions of African American experience. 'Potential', Jenkins answers, 'is what people say when they think what's in front of them isn't good enough.' What if the trash essay weren't a path, a gateway, something that showed its writers' 'potential'? Rather than the aesthetics-versus-morality problem that Sontag posits, how about looking at the confessional writing of the 2010s as an already unique historical event created by tensions between aesthetics and economics?

Ellison's 'inoffensive game' of aesthetics only *seems*, as Blanchot put it, risk-free. Ellison is posing as Leigh so he can pay the ruinous cost of his mother's private care home. Aesthetics masks not only ethics here, but economics, or what Lauren Berlant called *Cruel Optimism*: the dream of the possibility of a good life for self-made American individuals under capitalism. Tolentino characterised the interest in the online personal essay

as a ‘boom’ – an out-of-control economic model in which some got rich quick, and some did not, ‘for no good reason’. The trash essay was in fact a two-ended economic event that existed for very traceable reasons. Sarah Hepola, a former editor of personal essays at *Salon*, told Tolentino that it was ‘in part a response to an online climate where more content was needed at the exact moment budgets were being slashed’.[40] If the trash essay made the personal essay boom then bust on the literary stock exchange, its writers were seldom the investors. They were more like the factory workers, laid off when demand for an overhyped product bottomed out.

The real revelation of the trash essay lies in its frame story – the one that was created retrospectively, post-2015, by writers including Bennett and Tolentino. And that revelation was also one of economics. It was not just, as Hepola told Bennett, that these writers’ ‘Internet trail will be “I was a BDSM person” ’, but that ‘their Internet trail will be “I was a BDSM person”, and they did it for $150’.[41]

Pre-internet, the personal was equated with the private in both economic and individual terms: self-possession with possessions, and the leisurely style of the traditional personal essay with a degree of leisure. One of *Autostraddle*’s personal essays of 2014 was by Roxanne Gay, already a recognised professional essayist. Though she fits the rubric of bringing marginalised experience into the essay, unlike many unknown essayists, Gay does not apologise, ask for sympathy or highlight the possible differences between her situation and that of any inferred audience. Her sense of ease in the form means that she sounds less like a trash essayist and more like Didion. Gay has been criticised for keeping her economically privileged position out of her accounts of her life.

Pre-internet, having a public voice was linked to what was called a *private life*, which was something that went with private living quarters and, perhaps, a private income. People without these had little privacy, and no public voice, except as a crowd. Where they were granted identity, it was primarily impersonal, and often a requirement rather than a privilege. An identity card did not express anything about its carrier and allowed only

limited agency (the ability to cross a border, to enter, to vote) within externally designed structures.

Now identity has become tied to the personal and to the aesthetic, rather than to the public/ethical. When a marginalised identity becomes accepted – perhaps via a personal essay – the repeat performance of this identity in writing can, for its author, become an unwanted ongoing requirement. While defining identity can be the basis of claiming rights, its entry into the bourgeois world of personal writing can tie the bearer to its instrumentalisation.

'Memoirs', as the poet Anne Boyer wrote in her 2015 book-length lyric, experimental personal essay, *Garments Against Women*, 'are for property owners.' But the trash essay is not a memoir. To 'own' an experience is, in the trash essay, to lay claim to it and, contingently, to a self that experiences. To *make something of yourself* in words is one of the only ways those without the property of personal identity can access the ethical potential of risk. Given a platform to deploy linguistic capital, however much they are contributing their labour for very little or even for free, the minority writer is in a compromised position – both instrumentalised and instrumentalising. If the trash essay was an occasion in publishing that relied on this instrumentalisation of self, its trash author possessed an *occasional* self – prompted by the occasion and therefore temporary. Sometimes Watkins is the selfie-essay guy, and sometimes the fancy-restaurant guy. There's nothing wrong with this, but unlike the writer, his subjects have no choice. He hands on risk to them. In ways he does not, they belong to the essay.

In claiming an identity, personal style is often, for precarious or non-property owners, the only currency available, and, like identity, style is often formed under duress. Online identity is all about stylistic choice – of appearance, language, gesture. Identity that is chosen, contingent, performative is not 'personal'; but to gain solidarity it might be necessary to embrace this perfomance's artificiality, however much it is associated with consumerism in ways that the personal, whose self-possession hides its

relation to property, is not. Using – and telling stories about the use of – contingent identities is key. The instability of identity in *Erasure*/*American Fiction* is one story; the play of identity played out in the trash essay is another.

When I started writing from my life, I wanted to write like Didion. Or rather, like all readers who worship at the altar of the packing list of her commodified self, I wanted to be her. I wanted to be someone to whom this style came ‘naturally’, seemed to stem from her way of life. But I did not find that I had that kind of life, and I did not find that it did. So I started working in ways that I would later learn were not personal, essayistic or fictional, but ‘autofictional’, which is not a particularly online style, but one developed by post-war French avant-gardes and by the 1970s New Narrative movement, an arty queer gonzo embrace of personal voice and styles that felt simultaneously natural and stylised, and out of step with essayistic norms.

It was a secretly privileged movement, as its writers existed largely in the art world, if at its cool, epicentric margins. I was not anywhere near even one of these margins, but some of its formal concerns felt like something I could inhabit: something that offered the possibility of a self that evaded these two sides of the twentieth-century coinage of identity as private/public.

Like the trash essay, autofiction is in perpetual movement towards and away from traditional personal modes of autobiography. Perhaps this identity gap is essential to its mode of being, a mode that is one of longing: not quite desire, as desire pursues its object, but desire at one remove – a desire for desire. As with the trash essay, to bring it safely into a pre-existing tradition of personal writing would be to give it a home. Instead, like Blanchot’s poet, it remains homeless, refuses a home, embraces risk – is always a roving challenge to the boundaries of what can be discussed and how.

Writing the trash essay, there is no getting away from the traditional personal essay; and the trash essay's continuous search to find ways simultaneously to refer to and differ from its aesthetic origins puts it in the region of art. The question the trash essay asks about style always comes first. It doesn't only come before the content that seems to prompt it; it creates it. This is why the essay is inextricably linked not only to 'try' (*essai*) but to fail – not artistic failure but a failure to entirely inhabit the province of art.

Tolentino finishes her personal essay boom piece with the thought that, post Trump's 2016 election, 'individual perspectives do not, at the moment, seem like a trustworthy way to get to the bottom of a subject' – trashing the trash essay's status as ethics as well as art.[42] Tolentino continues to evaluate the trash essay as a failed personal essay, forgetting its intent to provide information, to create solidarities. It may be better to look at the trash essay not as drawing the political into art, but art into politics.

'The Personal Is Political' was a feminist slogan of the 1960s, codified in Carol Hanisch's 1970 essay, titled after a banner at the 1968 Miss America protest she organised. That this personal/political mashup centred on beauty as a performative aesthetic promoted as the personal quality of specific individuals is key.

Is beauty truth, and truth beauty? What makes Keats's question so tricky today is our surprise at hearing this. Just as it's conventional to find beauty queens fake, we're more used (in the paranoid reading style defined by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick) to finding truth proposed to us via depictions of the 'raw and real', what the IAS semantic intelligence engine called 'fear, sadness, horror and suffering', and to finding beauty – insofar as good 'style' is 'beautiful' – in these depictions. Or rather, we find truth in the paranoid action of revealing the 'truth' that is under 'beauty'. And what is revealed is judged beautiful partly because it is never beautiful.

If revelation is the trash essay's methodology, it is not paranoid as it does its own unpacking, so it is not 'beautiful'. It avoids the art/content division for which beauty (or Sontag's good 'style') is the dividing knife. The trash

essay's aesthetic is what, online, gets called 'cringe'. Clickbait grabs the reader with what is gross, embarrassing, tragic, but never classy. Cringe is neither truth nor beauty, but offers a way to make art engaging without the pressure for this art to be 'good'.

At the conference, what I did was to pose 'more of a comment than a question', which is very cringe, and is also a form of trolling: another refuge of amateurs online. To pose a comment rather than a question is also an amateur practice. It is evidence of being imperfectly informed, gauche, autodidactic. It participates in what Sianne Ngai calls the practice of finding a subject 'interesting': that of performing critical distance. But in its movement and its desire to move, it is always crossing that distance or threatening to cross it.

Ngai's words describe a para-academic practice, a Wikipedia tone, always inhabited imperfectly, risking failure. The kind of question I asked was the sort that embeds the risk of failure for para-academics like me who don't feel comfortable in a strictly academic setting. The troll question is an amateur form that, seeming to add information, exposes something in the information given: a lack. Like the trash essay, my question re-centred the lecture away from the canon the speaker proposed. By speaking in its own obviously failed style, it not only critiqued smoother forms but proposed an alternative: it expanded *what* could be spoken about, by which I mean *how*.

2025: Resistance Is Useless

Twitter's death day was 28 October 2022, when Elon Musk bought the platform. It had been on the cards for a while, but it took him some time to trash what over fifteen years of amateur input had created. He began in November 2022, by charging for account verification. What had been designed in 2009 as an authenticity and accountability check began to account only for ability to pay, resulting in a number of lawsuits from public figures against fake verified accounts in their names. Pre-Musk, Twitter charged advertisers to make the site free to the content creators who ensured its existence, but Musk charged users.

If Oct 2022 was Twitter's death day, its funeral took years. There was a time when it was still difficult to stay off Twitter, when friends had to wean themselves off its mix of car-crash narcissism, FOMO, self-righteous bigotry, clicktivism, shamers and reply guys. Only a few years ago, a friend tweeted: 'I haven't thought about Twitter in 48h. It seems like progress.' We're still there, most of us, but it's not working for us anymore, even though we're working for it. When I go on Twitter now, I don't get response, interaction. I don't see people I follow, who follow me. I see people (when they *are* people) who paid to be there, tweeting things that keep them there. It's like speaking to an empty room that is somehow also full. Or rather, it's exactly like being offline where who gets heard and whose work gets seen so often depends on who already has contacts, context or money. Creativity won't get you anywhere anymore.

What used to be a performative communication network has become a network of performative non-communication. But users who bemoan Twitter's demise are still there. Where else is there to go? I went over to one

of the alternatives and found it was like Twitter in the early 2010s. Twitter pre-Trump, pre-outrage. People swapped recipes and book recommendations, posted pictures of flowers, were openly grateful that it was ‘like old Twitter’. At first, like them, I thought this must be paradise. Then I found I didn’t want old Twitter anymore. I wanted a Twitter where something was at stake.

That’s because Twitter has formed what was my amateur, and is now my professional, practice – as well as my politics, as aesthetics and politics are never not linked. And that’s something it taught me too. Twitter taught me to be entertaining. It taught me to be smart. How to move someone. How to make them laugh in 140, then 280 characters. It taught me how to make my point playfully, sharply; to ask, sometimes successfully, for change. It taught me how to combine an image with a phrase in a way that causes the gap of meaning to mean more than either component. It taught me how to use these techniques to start and grow activist networks.

On Twitter, more than anywhere else, politics are aesthetics, and aesthetics are political: from Trump’s crowd-pulling grammatical mistakes to hashtag activism – #blacklivesmatter, #metoo. On Twitter, the joke is a political mode; the confession is a political mode; so is outrage; so are memes. They are political not only in their content. They are political because they are there, in this public forum. They are political because so many come from people who never had a voice in any public forum before.

At the same time the political, via the aesthetic, is personal. Because these creative acts are also how we argue, flirt, parent, find friends, get work: they are how we’ve learned to relate to each other, how we’ve made our lives. ‘We used to be a society,’ tweeted @messyventura in February 2024.[1] In losing Twitter, I lost a dimension of how to be social. And also a dimension of how to be creative. I see tweets – anomalous meatspace juxtapositions of words or images, like ‘the chance meeting on a dissecting table of a sewing machine and an umbrella’ – and I don’t tweet them.[2] I write tweets in my head and don’t post them. What would be the point any more?

The amateur internet is beginning to look less like a movement than a moment. We can already talk about the net as if it were geological time: ‘what era of the internet do you think was objectively the best?’ asked @drewtoothpaste on Twitter alternative, Bluesky. ‘i would probably say 2007–2013 because there was enough people there to be fun but it hadn’t yet gotten concentrated into There Are Only Five Possible Websites’.[3] ‘2013 as an end date makes sense,’ answered @keithcalder.com. ‘That’s when Tumblr sold to Yahoo. I think of that as when the “web 2” era started to suck.’

Digital enclosure is not a new idea. The swallowing up of smaller platforms by larger is the net equivalent of the enclosure of the commons in the eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries: the appropriation of land used in common, for free, by landowners whose stated aim was, like platforms, efficiency, but was as often a bid to increase the value of their land by uniting it, just as a platform capitalist limits access to creativity, to connection, via platform monopolies. ‘Foucault’, wrote Gilles Deleuze, ‘located the *disciplinary societies* in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; they reach their height at the outset of the twentieth. They initiate the organization of vast spaces of enclosure. The individual never ceases passing from one closed environment to another, each having its own laws.’[4] But we’re moving from Foucault’s biopolitics to an age of technopolitics, in which people are controlled less by the location of their bodies than by their access to connection.

Platform capitalism currently works by allowing access to content – much of which is amateur-generated – and the services needed to generate it only via its portals, whether that’s Google, Meta or that name that fails to stick: X. Unlike physical space, the net is not zero sum; but there is so often nowhere else to go, particularly for the amateurs I’ve written about in this book, who are not hackers, techies or nerds, but who have other skills – or no formal skills at all – and who need a ready-made platform in order to make something.

Twitter is a paradigm for other platforms. As they become increasingly driven by shareholder profits to the exclusion of functionality – what Cory Doctorow in 2023 called ‘enshittification’ – is it any wonder that amateurs expect more for their work than likes? Tailoring their output, they second-guess the platform’s requirements to win visibility and, with it, sponsors. Creators are back in the age of the patron.

It’s often been said that the social contract of the internet was free use in exchange for data. It’s less often said that the deal was free use in exchange for creativity. Social platforms have doubled down on extraction from users, both at the point of production and the point of consumption, as platforms have begun to sell creators’ own work back to them.

If the age of the amateur is over, this is partly amateurism’s fault. Or it’s the fault of some amateurs, because not all amateurism is the same. The amateur ethos of Web 2.0 has gone two ways. There are people who wanted aesthetics to be free and there are people who wanted to free asethetics so they could profit.

In April 2023, Reddit users staged a blackout when their CEO announced that the site would charge for its API (application programming interface), selling data scraped from user contributions – all those memes and jokes, all those posts that developed our styles of interaction, all those pieces of contemporary art – to companies that included AI developers, but also to those making the third-party apps crucial to the functioning of the site. Volunteer moderators responded by making subreddits private, or incorrectly labelling them ‘not safe for work’, causing a collapse in advertising revenue. There were creative protests: fashion reddits restricted posts to styles of the 1700s; a subreddit for the video game distributor Steam posted only about literal steam. Reddit responded by exempting ‘non-commercial’ apps from fees, but dissatisfied mods still resigned, a protest that debilitated the communities they defended. According to researchers at Northwestern University, Illinois, the free work Reddit moderators do could be valued at $3.4 million per year.[5]

Reddit went public on the stock market in March 2024, offering its long-term contributors the opportunity to pay for non-voting shares in the entity they created and maintain for free. The big stock owners are legacy media giant Condé Nast, Chinese gaming company Tencent and OpenAI (one of the targets of Reddit's API charge). What had been a commons went into private hands.[6]

If there's any justification for their actions, Reddit's owners were trying to get AI developers to pay for what they were already doing, using crawlers to scrape their site to train large language models. Wikipedia was OpenAI's most used data set, followed by Reddit. Pages created and upvoted by Reddit users accounted for around 22 per cent of GPT-3's training data.[7] Google trains on Reddit too, while OpenAI also uses transcriptions of YouTube videos.[8] Along with Midjourney, it scrapes Tumblr and Wordpress. All these platforms run on mostly amateur creative content. Steve Huffman, Reddit's CEO, threatened to block the crawlers that facilitated these scrapes, including the not-for-profit Common Crawl. Trouble is, blocking crawlers also blocks search engines, and Reddit relies on Google and other results to attract users into its conversations.

Every creative platform rewards volume of use, so many move AI-generated 'slop' up the search results. AI content is quicker and easier to produce, and it is produced exactly to this end, not by amateurs, or even by trolls, but by companies who want to be listed at the top of a search and know that volume of output linked to paid-for popular search terms (PPC or pay per click) is all they need. This means that we're in a historically unique position of a surplus of aesthetic products, however low-grade.

AI may be able to produce art without an artist, but what these companies cannot produce is an audience – which is where Kant's emphasis on judgement as a key ingredient in aesthetics comes in. Any art object, writes Karl Marx in *Grundrisse*, 'creates a public interested in art and sensitive to beauty. Production creates not only an object but likewise a subject for the object.'[9] The production, even of AI-generated aesthetic slop, creates, as its surplus, amateur audience activity that inevitably overflows the platforms'

use of their participation for profit. And aesthetic judgement is a critical practice. As the French philosopher Bernard Stiegler, who has written extensively on amateurism, points out, the art object always 'accompanies, therefore, the question of the formation of a *critical public*'.[10] The lively, active audiences of comments boxes and forums have all the factors of Lauren Berlant's 'intimate publics': fan groups created around (often commercial) cultural products (in Berlant's *Female Complaint* this is twentieth-century 'women's literature'), creating 'juxtapolitical' spaces, venues for what Jacques Rancière called dissensus: the creation of politics via dialectics, a.k.a. liking, trolling, shitposting . . .

But, as aesthetic judgement has become labour, this amateur work is increasingly extractive, blurring the distinction between the truly amateur and what constitutes a job. Musk's X relies, ironically, on amateurs, since he replaced its content-moderation team with an in-house crowd-sourced fact-checking system, Community Notes, which consists of untrained volunteers. This may look like the 'radical trust' of user-built sites like IMDb and Wikipedia but on a monetised platform it has a slightly different flavour. In 2023, Google cancelled its contract with the Australian search quality-control company Appen after its workers staged a protest against 'poverty wages'.[11] If these actions threaten the presence of quality factual information online, what about the presence of quality fiction?

One reason that platforms including Amazon and Etsy don't excise low-quality AI-generated aesthetic products is because they don't distinguish between the likes given by a bot and a human. AI used to be trained using what OpenAI calls RLHF – reinforcement learning from human feedback – and this work was paid, but aesthetic evaluation is increasingly sourced via apps that persuade users that interacting with an AI for free is play.

The word play suggests both rule-based sport and the more freeform play that children – and creators – engage in: play in which the feedback loop aims not to more perfectly follow, but to modulate, the rules. More AI is now 'self-learning', and it also learns via a kind of play, but only to

improve its response to rules. AI can play a rule-based game or a sport, but it cannot play for fun.

‘Entertainment under late capitalism is the prolongation of work,’ wrote Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer in 1944.[12] Online, work and play as they knew it are inverted. If entertainment, online, often takes the place of work that would otherwise be paid, work involves a rather desperate – as Ngai would say, ‘zany’ – imitation of labour as a form of entertainment, for only hopeful profit. In the absence of pay, YouTubers, Instagrammers and TikTokers are not employed, but act as if they were. This performance of work’s vibe exists not only because platforms have made space for it but because so many offline professions have been stripped of status, job security and power, while the entry bar to any profession has been raised. Requirements for longer, more expensive training are an education in normalising debt: lifelong learning in its worst sense. We spend longer practising professions – in the sense of rehearsing them – in proportion to practising – as in carrying them out. To reach professional status via formal qualifications is no longer a given: the rehearsal becomes the performance.

Pre-internet, the work created the worker. As Hegel wrote:

> Work forms and shapes the thing. The negative relation to the object becomes its *form* and something *permanent*, because it is precisely for the worker that the object has independence. This *negative* middle term of the formative *activity* is at the same time the individuality or pure being-for-self of consciousness which now, in the work outside of it, acquires an element of permanence. It is in this way, therefore, that consciousness, *qua* worker, comes to see in the independent being [of the object] its *own* independence.[13]

Online, where work is a creative act, the consciousness of the worker has become the product, the object. And it does not become independent but remains interdependent.

They used to say: If you're not being charged for a service, you're the product. Now you're not only the product but also the consumer and the raw material. If, as Marx wrote, the creation of objects under capitalism was less material than social reproduction – that the labourer produced objects to maintain the self, and capitalism used workers to produce objects for the sake of reproducing capitalism – then online, social reproduction has become *the* form of production.[14] The self produces the self aesthetically – via writing, photography, video – as both material and product. Poesis, tellingly, autocorrects to 'poses'. The personal turn of both art and writing online is both a critical examination of and a compliance with this state.

Digital art is not object-oriented (yes, that's a pun). The production of the object, which once seemed the object of the exercise of making art, now comes last. 2019: I'm on a panel with the cyberfeminist artist Cornelia Sollfrank, who tells me she now makes physical multiples of her digital works, so curators can show them and buyers can collect them, a process that produces Sollfrank as a professional artist in the meatspace art world.

Online, the art object is now produced in excess of the work of art. Internet users intuitively know this. Inverting Walter Benjamin's idea of the aura of the original, there is no originality in the object. This weakens relations between object and value, which is not a bad thing because what makes digital artworks special (much as platforms would like to make uncomplicated profit from them) is their added valuelessness, an excess produced by an abstraction from exchange value that guarantees their inclusion in the political holding space of art.

What is central to anything aesthetic is its removal from economic space. 'Need and utility lead to self-same reproduction,' wrote Brian Massumi in *Parables for the Virtual* (2002); but uselessness 'lends itself to invention'.[15] This happens automatically online. On Instagram, Pinterest and Tumblr, the online amateur curator of images, like Giorgio Agamben's collector, 'frees things from the "slavery of usefulness" '.[16]

Agamben's collector notices 'the *alienation* through which this act of freeing was able to take place, by which the value for the connoisseur took

the place of the use value'.[17] This process of aesthetic alienation is described by Theodor Adorno as an attribute of art but also of kitsch: 'The existence of trash expresses inanely and undisguisedly the fact that men have succeeded in reproducing from within themselves a piece of what otherwise imprisons them in toil, and in symbolically breaking the compulsion of adaptation by themselves creating what they feared.' In any art act, 'what men trembled before, they have placed at their own disposal'.[18]

The problem is that the art world (professional art) has its own set of 'use values'. If Jacques Rancière described his contemporary 'aesthetic regime' as the constant movement of the non-aesthetic (including kitsch) into art spaces, this abstraction can be no more than a gesture towards freeing everyday objects or processes from economic entanglement.

Online the opportunity offered to artists, to abstract 'what otherwise imprisons them in toil', is extended to amateurs. This might seem to answer Lefebvre's 1968 call that technology be used to 'let everyday life become a work of art!' but, like the galleries, museums and publishers of the meatspace art world, online platforms are run with a range of financial and cultural objectives in mind.[19]

The nature of aesthetic abstraction online is often understood literally – as a virtualising of meatspace objects and experiences – prompting Kat Kitay, writing in *Spike Art Magazine* in 2024 to coin *technoromanticism* as art's post-post-digital move, which is all about re-physicalising the virtual.[20] But the net's immateriality is only a metaphor that disguises some of its economic realities. And this metaphor has a history. Jean-François Lyotard's 1985 exhibition Les Immatériaux, which had the input of some of the thinkers I've mentioned in this book, was held at the Centre Georges Pompidou as part of a European initiative titled *Beyond Matter*. Designed as a physical space for embodied interaction with emerging digital technologies, it was hardly *immatériel*, but the exhibition title's metaphor of digital immateriality stuck.

When all that's solid seems to melt into air, it's time to try some historical re-materialism. An alternative to digital enclosure might be digital *dis*closure: the disclosure of the networks behind online artworks and the platforms that support them.

In her work *Is the Museum a Battlefield?* (2013), Hito Steyerl suggests that the art world has become a money-laundering process for big business, and particularly for arms companies.[21] Something similar could be said of social media platforms, apparently venues for aesthetic production, in which data mining is not only a metaphor for extraction at the user end but involves literal mining across a map of environmental extraction that closely follows industrial and colonial infrastructures implemented by Western powers in the nineteenth century.[22] Aesthetic encounters continue to facilitate geographical networks of exploitation and environmental destruction. Platforms are not *immatériaux*, but physical. The 'cloud' is made of the steam from AI server cooling process that exacerbates water scarcity for the inhabitants of already water-poor areas, including Des Moines, Iowa, where residents sued OpenAI in 2022 over excess water consumption during the city's hottest months.[23]

Meatspace art has also always embedded hidden networks of production that are social and economic as well as physical. As the critic Mitch Speed writes in 'Fat Over Lean: What It Means to Talk about Culture, Class, and Power', an unpublished version of a shorter piece published in 2023 in *ArtReview*, for someone to have the financial security to dedicate themselves to a professional career in the arts, in an era of the withdrawal of state support, there has to be a hidden structure: someone else making serious money in the background – family money, a conventionally employed partner – the kind of money that's rarely made from art before the creator of the work is dead and their objects collectable.[24] Art is a matter of time.

Lefebvre's 1968 call for everyday life to become art suggests not only everyday as in ordinary, but *art every day*. In 1934, John Dewey described

everyday aesthetics not as the traditional sectioning-off of aesthetic experience but as a durational engagement with an object or process, based on an accumulation of *Art as Experience*. This idea was reworked in 1978 by Nelson Goodman as the question: *When is art?*[25] Which prompts the further question: *Who decides when?* The professional creative world, which has only recently given retrospective recognition to, for example, work by women and artists of colour, still embeds timekeeping as gatekeeping.

Amateur creators should also be wary of *having a moment* in a professional art world where recognition has sometimes been paid in the double-sided coin of appropriation. This is especially true online, where the amateur is often also anonymous. Artist Marisa Olson, inventor of the term *postinternet*, wrote: 'Both my online and offline work was after the internet in the sense that "after" can mean both "in the style of" and "following".'[26] There is a difference between working 'in the style of' and directly appropriating material. Olson was a founder of Nasty Nets internet surfing club (2006–12), a place where amateur met professional practice. Although it was collaborative, this was not always collaboration with the consent – or even the knowledge – of some of its participants. 'Pro-surfers' (professional artists) would 'feature found material created by amateur online users, reflecting an appreciation for the unexpected ways that users find to express themselves with the computer ("Awesome email from my mom," announces one post by Guthrie Lonergan)'.[27]

Postinternet art also raises questions when it parallels paid work. In 2002, artist Heath Bunting created *Community Courier*, in which the artist used a platform to match up parcels with people willing to carry them, a model that has become standard in peer-to-peer online services.[28] This was art, and also not art, because it had a use. Its intent was countercultural but it has become a paradigm for commercial net practices that 'gamify' services, undermining paid work.

Art Thoughtz by Hennessy Youngman (the artist Jayson Musson) is a 2012 parody of art criticism that is also art. His video on relational

aesthetics describes exactly the kind of art world exploitation that asked participants for the same sorts of involvement as platforms do from users. ‘Fun’ interfaces that ask respondents to provide aesthetic labour for free also posit art as a radical alternative to everyday life to which the participant – unlike the artist – has only temporary access. Musson’s exhibition space for this work was not a gallery but YouTube.[29]

Online the distinction between ‘artist’ and ‘audience’ has long been, as Rancière would say, ‘blurred’. But what about offscreen contributors? Not only the creators of the images and texts that have been scraped for content without permission, but the workers who evaluate and tag the most disturbing images. To include all these people could give every digital work of art almost as many credits as a film. It would change what we talk about when we talk about art, or an artist. This has consequences not only for the art world, but for the idea of professionalism itself.

Why are aesthetics the canary in the mine for professionalism? Because aesthetics are big business online – one of the biggest. And they’re being used to shift Web 2.0 to what’s becoming known as Web3. We already know about data capitalism and information capitalism; but Web3 is aesthetic capitalism.

~

Web3 is indivisible from NFTs, which are best known for the digital art bubble that wreaked such economic havoc in 2022, making a very few speculators and artists rich. But an NFT is not an artwork; it’s a unique blockchain identifier that proves ownership of any digital asset.

NFT artworks have adapted some of the styles and structures built up during Web 2.0, but not others. As with Web 2.0 art, NFTs can be shared: viewed, copied and downloaded without loss of quality, and for free. Each copy is not a ‘mechanical’ – or even a ‘digital’ – ‘reproduction’; it is exactly identical to the original: it *is* the original. Ownership of an NFT

does not rely on possessing the original or even the rights to the work but possessing its encryption record – effectively its till receipt.

NFTs are, before anything else, monetised collector's items. This creates a double-edged position for creators. While pre-internet copyright more often benefited production companies – publishers and music and film producers – rather than creators, creativity in the Web 2.0 era often went entirely unpaid, the term 'sharing' covering a multitude of sins. Web 2.0 platforms, claiming they were not publishers, evaded the legal responsibilities for content that constrained legacy media, while passing blame for copyright violations to amateur modders.[30] If NFTs solve many of these problems, enabling artists to sell their work without the intervention of galleries, like Web 2.0 platforms, they rely on individual artists to promote their work, requiring them to have the time and resources to develop appropriate skillsets to create systems of patronage via paid access to artworks and art networks, online and off – not only products but meatspace party and show invites. The incentive is to reproduce scarcity. The watchword is *exclusive*, signalling a narrower, meaner, more private net.

This branch of digital art is unlikely to generate or support any aesthetic theory that proposes art outside the sphere of monetised production and exchange. Overturning both meatspace artists' attempts to create work outside financial systems, and of Web 2.0 amateurs' experiments in aesthetic levelling – creating communal work like memes, or virtualising objects of value on Pinterest and Tumblr – NFTs are 'minted'. They answer the political geographer David Harvey's 2005 prediction of the neoliberal 'financialisation of everything', elevating pure financial exchange into an artform with consequences that are not only aesthetic but political and social.[31]

As with much Web 2.0 net art, the artwork is less the object but the network. Consensys, the Web3 blockchain company, suggests that 'an undeniable draw of Web3 is the way in which leaderless online groups of like-minded people can quickly gather, collectively pool capital, and make

decisions'.[32] This undemocratic notion offers decentralised, cross-border finance with the disturbing potential to act and extract across local, even global, legislative borders. (Consensys also owns Planetary Resources, an asteroid-mining company.)

One reason copyright has never worked online is that the net is not a scarcity economy. Unlike the agricultural commons whose tragedy, according to ecologist Garrett Hardin (1968) was that anything that could be got for free would be depleted through overexploitation, the digital commons rely on overexploitation for their continued existence. The more people who visit a site, the more popular it becomes; the more people who mod a meme, the more it is judged culturally important. If, according to McKenzie Wark's mashup of quotes from Stewart Brand's *Whole Earth Catalog* and Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *The Social Contract*, 'information wants to be free but is everywhere in chains', then Web 2.0 got us used to online aesthetics that are bountifully free at the point of delivery, much as they are embedded in chains of extraction.

While the vectoralist classes (the digital capitalist class described in Wark's 2004 *Hacker Manifesto*) 'depend on information's scarcity' for profit, they also depend on an excess of amateur aesthetics.[33] Trouble is, you can't stop people making things, particularly at a time when the promise of status and financial security has been stripped from many professions, making amateur aesthetic creation look like a risk worth taking. You can't even stop people making things that make things. Spammers have used AI to up the creative odds, parodying both data capitalists' platform capture and its inverse, the folksiness of the handmade. 'Made it with my own hands,' claim the multiple 'creators' of AI Shrimp Jesus, a meme that, bizarrely, populated Facebook in 2024.[34] These images, mostly made as fronts for clickthrus to fake products and other scams, are similar to the cheap meatspace Jesus art objects that have been pushed at us for centuries – except they're much more creative: besides Shrimp Jesus, there's sand-sculpture Jesus, Jesus made out of drinks cans, ramen noodles, or strawberries. Most are depictions not of a 'live' Jesus but of Jesus art.

They are artworks about artworks, a joke on both the artisan and the readymade.

Shrimp Jesus, posted by @ladymedalion, on Reddit r/ShrimpIsBugs, 2024

Are these the products of prompt engineers, or is this what's become known as the dead internet, where bots create and only bots view and follow, boosting a site through unusually large traffic? Though there's

speculation that some people might be fooled by the assertion that these works are handmade and exist IRL, neither the algorithms that upvote these creations nor most viewers care whether the work was materially crafted, making the framing assertion itself part of the work: not craft but art.

2023. Dr Eugenia Stamboliev of the University of Vienna tells me that her computational science students think they are making art because they are using AI to make saleable visual ‘products’. Their shortcut bypasses professional skills, but also the amateur’s capacity to experiment. These students, Stamboliev tells me, don’t think their work is art because it creates an alternative to capitalist spaces, but *because of* its ability to exist within them.

As an alternative, Bernard Stiegler envisaged an *economy of the amateur*: ‘Against a consumer economy that depletes the desires of consumers, an economy of contribution (one that makes possible cultural and cognitive technologies) would be psychically and collectively individuated by amateurs.’[35]

This is not a net dream. The net was born of an ‘economy of contribution’. In 1989, Tim Berners-Lee developed the World Wide Web in his spare time while working at CERN. In 1991 Linus Torvalds, then a student at the University of Helsinki, posted to the comp.os.minix newsgroup: ‘I’m doing a (free) operating system (just a hobby, won’t be big and professional).’ Linux was developed as open-source code that relied on what came to be known as commons-based peer production, and it is far from the only volunteer-developed web technology. SHARE was an IBM-run user group founded in 1955 that freely shared the source code of IBM’s early operating systems for user modding, and only ceased operations in 1999. In the early twenty-first century, LiveJournal and Wordpress used open-source software to facilitate bloggers’ creativity. Even the military-developed proto-web, ARPANET, was refined in the 1960s and early 1970s via an informal feedback process (request for comments, or RFC).

When BASIC (written by Bill Gates and Paul Allen) was illegally shared by amateurs, Gates wrote an ‘open letter to hobbyists’, published in the

Homebrew Computer Club newsletter for 1 January 1976: ‘Who can afford to do professional work for nothing?’ he asked. ‘What hobbyist can put three man-years into programming, finding all the bugs, documenting his product and distributing it for free?’[36] This is *the* big question, and one that must be asked again now that so much of the net runs on unpaid aesthetic content provided by amateurs. *What hobbyist can put years into creating work that changes not only the way we produce and consume art but our forms of economic, political and interpersonal interactions?*

Ironically, the Homebrew newsletter was a Xeroxed zine distributed across a small, informal network of programmers whose involvement in the group was outside paid work. But they weren’t exactly amateurs; they were hackers.

As Wark admits, things have changed since *A Hacker Manifesto* was written in the late 1990s: the days when people hoped the internet would be a utopian space, and others didn’t know about it at all, or thought having a presence there was optional. Wark’s hackers were, like the members of the Homebrew Club, skilled and often professionally trained. Amateurs are something else.

Stiegler classes hackers and amateurs together:

> Hackers are neither consumers nor clients or users: they are practitioners – that is to say, amateurs of the world in the age of its numerization. Working outside of salaried work-time, such as one sees in the case of hackers or occasional performers, is exemplary of the work of the amateur.[37]

Stiegler answers Gates’s question with his phrase *outside of salaried work-time*. The existence of the amateur depends on a stable income that allows time for other pursuits. The solution to art’s problems, post- as pre-internet lies outside the realm of aesthetics, in the realms of social and economic justice.

Stiegler's piece was published on the site he founded, Ars Industrialis, sometime between 2008 and 2012 (no specific date is given), just as social media was beginning to give amateurs the chance to enter domains that were once the preserve of hackers. The amateurs I have written about in this book are not hackers. And there are crucial differences in the way they create that allow these 'hobbyists' to put years into creating significant works.

Hackers, Wark wrote, were 'not joiners'; amateurs work in groups, albeit across contingent geographies and elective networks. Hackers created new things: amateurs riff and mod existing material. Hackers were a 'class that makes abstractions, and a class made abstract'; amateurs were always already virtual, even before the net, in their hopeful mimesis of professional practice. Hackers were the avant-garde; amateurs are radically nostalgic. Hackers were 'resisting educational content' (Wark opposes education to knowledge); amateurs play with its forms. If 'to hack is to express knowledge in any of its forms', then to be amateur is to express ignorance, or smartly and creatively to play dumb with the shells of forms of knowledge: the encyclopaedia (Aesthetics Wiki); the public service broadcast (TikTok); the memoir or personal column (blogging).[38] If 'new hacks supersede old hacks, and devalue them as property', new amateur aesthetics acts build the value of a corpus of communally created work.[39]

If, as Wark writes, 'hacking is the production of production', then amateurism is the pure production of an *excess* of words, of images. It is a waste of space made from a waste of time. If Wark's hackers were 'inventing relations outside of representation', amateurs delve deeper into it, producing a never-ending stream of memes, inspo-grams and fanfics based on existing material and styles.[40] If Web 2.0 countercultures (and subcultures) legitimated some of the most arrant forms of Silicon Valley individualism – the vibe without the politics: *free* as a style, an aesthetic, a surface indicator of cool in the service of those who profit from freely given amateur work – then amateurs push the aesthetic back into political

territory, making art for art's sake, reclaiming aesthetics from those who would monetise them, using parody, pastiche and kitsch.

I chose the word amateur rather than user for this book, though the term is debatable. The amateurs I describe have a range of skills, but what's crucial has been the net's openness to those who have none – just a desire to create. Some of their work deliberately highlights their 'skilless' user status. But they all deserve to be described as amateurs, not because of their skill levels, but for their levels of engagement. Even an amateur without professional skills is, for this reason, not a user. A user uses some thing and, in this process, the thing that is used is centred. An amateur loves something and what is centred in the amateur experience is its modus operandi: love.

Love, like amateurism, is an admission of incompleteness. If, as the poet Fred Moten and the scholar and activist Stefano Harney notice in *All Incomplete*, capitalism 'can't incomplete what is already incomplete', nor can it further amateurise amateurism. The amateur is insulated from exploitation because as soon as they enter into a monetary relation they become professional, and their work, a matter of labour law. This is a double-edged privilege, always putting the amateur in danger of exploitation. Though some unionised gig workers (e.g. London's Uber drivers) have been successful in gaining employee rights, the Reddit strikers could not be considered employees because the nature of their work was sporadic and voluntary, controlled by that amateur impulse: a love of specific subjects, objects, processes.

Love and art are both forms of paying attention. 'To love anything at all is like loving nothing at all,' wrote Stiegler, 'and to love nothing at all is to be no longer capable of careful attention: the amateur can no longer love wherever consumption has killed attentiveness to what is consumed.' [41] If, online, attention is an economy, to pay attention freely, as an amateur – attention with love – has the potential to challenge these economic structures.

A hack is, as Wark puts it, ‘difference’. It is an authentic version of Sianne Ngai’s ‘gimmick’, which is a commercial object or strategy that only appears to offer a shortcut through capitalism. An amateur act is an anti-gimmick: it promises no solutions but fills the space it creates online, which means it takes time. As it expands, it decelerates. It is, as Espen Aarseth wrote of digital narrative in 1997, ‘ergodic’: a ‘nontrivial effort is required to allow the reader to traverse the text’.[42]

This makes cyber still a question of space, but its nature as space is ill-defined. While its geographic realities should be disclosed, so should its geographic metaphors. Though the internet is a public space – literally and metaphorically a forum, a space constituted and created by its public – it is not a democracy, and this is a thought that has sometimes been used against amateurs. Reddit’s CEO, during the 2023 strike, commented that mods were ‘landed gentry: The people who get there first get to stay there and pass it down to their descendants, and that is not democratic’.[43] But mods were not there first. They do not own the platforms on which they work; they are more like tenant farmers. Or they are like the users of the original pastoral commons, which, despite their free use, had always been owned, and their use controlled, by the landowner.

When what threatens the viability of the aesthetic net is its concentration into the hands of fewer powerful commercial groups, the solution might be dis-solution, the fix for enclosure not only disclosure but dis-closure. Dis-closure can look a bit like enclosure: the small, often gated communities of Mastodon, a renewed interest in RSS feeds, paywalled Tinyletters and Substacks. They appear to lack the reach of the big platforms but this itself is aesthetics: a metaphor. Though technologist and publisher James Bridle makes the comparison, the internet is not what thinker Timothy Morton described as a ‘hyperobject’; it only looks like one, because of its increasing domination by a small number of very large companies. The hyperobject is itself a metaphor, and a harmful one. The internet, like climate change, is more difficult to engage with if it is imagined as a single, overwhelming

entity. But the internet's need for metaphors shows how, like amateurism, it is a fundamentally aesthetic space.

Space has long been a metaphor for whatever lies behind our flatscreens. It suggests unformed, undefined potential, the opposite of *place*. When space becomes place, even virtually, it begins to have a history, which has always been a component of personal identity. The net's resistance to place has offered users the opportunity to be defined by something other than our offline circumstances and histories. When Wark writes, 'what matters in the struggle for history is to express its potential to be otherwise', this is something amateurs do helplessly, something the net has given them space to do.[44]

Online vocabulary – all that 'post-digital' and 'pre-internet' – suggests an unstable present. If 'a hacker history knows only the present tense', Wark wrote, an amateur history knows only the past and the future, and only mediated versions of those.[45] The online amateur's relation to time is aesthetic, cast loose into a virtual future or past, where something better can be imagined to take – or to have taken – place. Living in possibility rather than history, the net retains its potential as a no-place, a utopia.

This can seem a lot of fuss over a few memes, blogs, vlogs, Twitter, TikTok and Instagram accounts, over products that were very varied in quality and intent, over practices that often had no explicit ethical, political or aesthetic theories attached. But if you're asking more of this practice, that's likely because you're not looking at it as art – which is fair enough, because much of it serves several causes. Depending on your position, you might be seeing online aesthetic acts as inadequate forms of politics (that old complaint about what clicktivism 'actually does'), or you might be seeing them as inadequate forms of business. But, when you think about what you'd ask of this work, think of what you'd ask of a work of art. Would you ask that it reframe the ways you see things; that it offer new ways of experiencing the world; that it move you – to laughter, outrage, tears; that it push social and political boundaries, that it critique creatively and

interactively in ways journalism and traditionally published nonfiction cannot; that it facilitate conversation, community? Online aesthetic work does all these things. Why ask for more?

Why not? ‘Asking about art’s task’, wrote Giorgio Agamben, ‘is the equivalent of asking what could be its task on the day of the Last Judgment.’[46] An angel of history, perhaps, I have recorded what has hardly been noticed, is being swept under the carpet: the great age of the internet amateur for which platforms took both the profit and the credit.

Amateurism wasn’t a moment, it *is* a movement: international, intercultural and, like all revolutions, imperfect. The revolution happened and we didn’t notice. It was a revolution more shocking than anything modernism or postmodernism produced, because it opened up creative practice on a huge scale to those without the money, training or access to train or operate in the professional arts.

If the angel of history looks backwards and warns, then I am warning that we are losing not only the space for amateur creativity, but its narrative. I am not providing a *grundrisse*, a blueprint for something that is yet to be built. I am paying tribute to what has already been done.

To go back to my Paris friends: the critics, designers, editors, writers of the minor online literary journal I mentioned at the beginning of this book. Or should I call them colleagues? Most of us were no longer on Twitter, the platform where most of us had met, or were there sporadically, reluctantly. We were scattered between new and old alternative platforms. Many of us, including me, were no longer using social media for personal stuff. And we were hardly able to use it for our work, as the sort of work we did depended on functioning informal online networks. There was a broken link, a 404 error, and it was social. A community of amateurs is necessary for any successful professional to emerge. It’s a myth that artists emerge from nowhere. But it’s a myth that amateurs do too.

This situation that had enabled us didn’t flourish in some utopia. It happened at a very specific moment in history, the moment at which the

idealism of the early internet met the market. It happened on a specific combination of free and commercial platforms. If too many of these online spaces were modelled in the service of those who did not have amateur interests at heart – or who had an interest, in the financial sense, in what amateurs produced there – pre-internet, these spaces did not exist at all. And because they did not exist, nor did we.

There is no point being idealistic about the past of the digital commons but it's possible to learn from, and build on, what happened there. The decuperation of the internet needs – as a number of writers have outlined – governance, but it also needs aesthetics. This is not only a question of aesthetic theory but practice. Practice creates space.

Online space doesn't work like meatspace. It is not something that exists outside us: it is created, expanded and defined by live aesthetic practice. It 'takes place' via performance, narrative, language, network and metaphor. It never becomes place: it remains malleable, expandable, constantly reshaped by the users who constitute it.

If the creative practice of ordinary users is noticed, valued, supported and allowed to flourish, this could be the beginning of something good.

DIS-SOLVE

DIS-CLOSE

DECELERATE

DOMESTICATE

REMATERIALISE

DECUPERATE

Acknowledgements

With grateful thanks to my funders. This project was co-funded by Arts Council Ireland and an ERC at NUI Maynooth (grant numbers HORIZON-MSCA-2022-PF-01Project: 101108189).

Thanks to Verso Books and to my editor, Leo Hollis.

Aesthetics wants to be free. Thank you Wikipedia, Stanford.edu, Anna's Archive, Libgen, Academia.edu, Monoskop, Archive.org, Archive.is, Wayback Machine, the Deleuze Seminars, Marxists.org.

For conversations: Caroline MacCathmhaoil; Isabella Streffen; Fernando Sdrigotti; Lauren Elkin, McKenzie Wark; my colleagues at the Department of Media Studies, NUI Maynooth especially Dr Janeen Naji and Dr EL Putnam.

Thank you, Luke Clancy of RTÉ's *Culture File*, who produced a series of radio talks from work in progress for the book.

And, for first-order response, always: Florence; Elliot; Stephen.

Earlier versions of the following parts of the book have been previously published elsewhere. A version of the first section of 'Selfies' was published as 'Book Lovers, Literary Necrophilia in the Twenty-first Century', on the *Los Angeles Review of Books* website on 14 December 2017, and in *The Digital Critic: Literary Culture Online* (Houman Barekat, Robert Barry and David Winters, eds, OR Books, 2017). A version of the last section of 'Selfies' was published at maifeminism.com on 27 January 2020.

Timeline

1790 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*
1856 John Ruskin, *Of the Turnerian Picturesque*
1857 Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*
1896 Lumière brothers, *L'arrivée d'un train à La Ciotat*
1899 Sigmund Freud, *Screen Memories*
1929 Walter Benjamin, *Folk Art* (fragment)
1935 Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*
1937 Herbert Marcuse, *Art and Liberation*
1944 Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *The Culture Industry*
1947 Henri Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life*
1948 Truman Capote, *Other Voices, Other Rooms*
1950 Alan Turing, *Computing, Machinery and Intelligence*
1955 SHARE IBM-run user group for IBM mainframe computers
1960 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Eye and Mind*
1965 Yoko Ono, *Cut Piece*
1965 Julie Christie, *Darling*
1966 Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation*
1969 Bob Taylor, *ARPANET*
1967 Roland Barthes, *Death of the Author*
1968 Henri Lefebvre, *Everyday Life in the Modern World*
1968 Garrett Hardin, *The Tragedy of the Commons*
1969 Michel Foucault, *What Is an Author?*
1970 Carol Hanisch, *The Personal Is Political*
1972 Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*
1974 Marina Abramović, *Rhythm 0*
1975 Martha Rosler, *Semiotics of the Kitchen*

1975 Stuart Hall, *Resistance Through Rituals*
1975 Chantal Akerman, *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles*
1976 Bill Gates, *An Open Letter to Hobbyists*
1979 Dick Hebdige, *Subculture*
1979 Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*
1980 Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*
1981 Julie Kristeva, *Women's Time*
1983 Vaporware
1984 Jean-François Lyotard, "The Sublime and the Avant-Garde"
1991 Linus Torvalds, *Linux*
1993 Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Sense of the World*
1994 The Poetry Virgins, *Sauce*
1994 Rare, *Killer Instinct*
1996 Brewster Kahle, *The Internet Archive (Archive.org)*
1997 Dubravka Ugrešić, *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender*
1998 Nicholas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*
1999 Tracy Chevalier, *The Girl with the Pearl Earring*
1999 Pyra Labs, *Blogger*
1999 Giorgio Agamben, *The Melancholy Angel*
2000 Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*
2000 Google AdWords
2000 Juliana Spahr, LIVE
2001 Internet Archive, *The Wayback Machine* (public access)
2001 William Basinski, *The Disintegration Loops*
2001 Percival Everett, *Erasure*
2002 Heath Bunting, *Community Courier*
2002 Julia Darling, *Julia's Diary*
2002 Nicholas Bourriaud, *Postproduction*
2002 Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual*
2003 Flarf
2003 Peter Webber, *The Girl with the Pearl Earring*
2003 Greenspan, DeWolfe, Anderson, Berman, MySpace

2004 Mark Zuckerberg, Facebook
2004 Marisa Olson, American Idol Training Blog
2004 McKenzie Wark, *A Hacker Manifesto*
2005 Tim O'Reilly, *What Is Web 2.0*
2005 Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*
2005 4Chan, *Caturday*
2005 Chen, Hurley, Karim, YouTube
2005 Chris Neukirchen, *Anarchia*
2006 Marisa Olson et al., *Nasty Nets Internet Surfing Club (2006–2012)*
2006 Dorsey, Glass, Stone, Williams, Twitter
2007 David Karp, Tumblr
2007 Nakagawa, Unebasami, Icanhascheezburger
2007 Cheese, Rountree, Wilkinson, Baron, *Know Your Meme*
2008 Bernard Steigler, *Amateur*
2008 Gwyneth Paltrow, Goop
2008 Satoshi Nakamoto, bitcoin.org
2009 Ed Halter, 'After the Amateur'
2009 Hito Steyerl, *In Defense of the Poor Image*
2010 Systrom, Krieger, Instagram
2011 Macintosh Plus, *Floral Shoppe*
2011 Jacques Rancière, *Aisthesis*
2011 James Bridle, *The New Aesthetic*
2011 Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*
2011 Marisa Olson, *What Is Postinternet?*
2012 Sheila Heti, *How Should a Person Be?*
2012 Sianne Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories*
2012 Jayson Musson, *Art Thoughtz by Hennessy Youngman*, YouTube
2013 Atsuko Sato, Doge (the meme)
2013 Nedroid, *The Internet*
2014 Amalia Ulman, *Excellences and Perfections*
2014 McCoy, Dash, *Quantum* (first NFT)
2015 BookCorpus
2015 Anon, *Cursed Images* (Tumblr)
2015 Anne Boyer, *Garments Against Women*

2015 Laura Bennett, ‘First-Person Industrial Complex’
2016 Zhang Yiming, TikTok
2016 Microsoft, *Tay* (Twitterbot)
2017 Nick Land, ‘A Quick and Dirty Introduction to Accelerationism’
2017 Jia Tolentino, ‘The Personal Essay Boom Is Over’
2018 Aesthetics Wiki
2018 Barbara Hammer, *The Art of Dying or (Palliative Art Making in the Age of Anxiety)*
2019 Achille Mbembe, *Necropolitics*
2020/02 Denis Shiryaev, *L’arrivée d’un train à La Ciotat*
2020 Timnit Gebru, co-leader of Google’s Ethical Artificial Intelligence Team, sacked
2020 Shawn Presser, *Books3*
2020 Nadeem, Bethke, Reddy, *StereoSet*
2020 Venvonis, *Vowlenu*
2021 Harney, Moten, *All Incomplete*
2021 OpenAI, Dall-E
2021 NFT boom
2022 Kane Parsons, *The Backrooms*
2022 @pharmapsychotic, *Clip Interrogator*
2022 Elon Musk buys Twitter
2022 OpenAI, Outpainting
2022 Residents of Des Moines, Iowa, sue OpenAI over water use
2023 Reddit mod strike
2023 University of Chicago, *Nightshade* and *Glaze*
2023 Hito Steyerl, Mean Images
2023 Cory Doctorow, *The Internet Con*
2024 Cord Jefferson, *American Fiction*
2024 Claire Bishop, *Disordered Attention*
2024 Legacy Russell, *Black Meme*
2024 Reddit IPO

Notes

2004: Amateurs

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2007: Our Aesthetic LOLcats

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